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# What is a successful diet?

Often when I am working with clients, they say things like, 'This doesn't seem like a diet to me.' This is because diets are synonymous with deprivation in our heads. Just like marriages are with compromise, roads with potholes and work with long hours. So, if we are on a good road we feel as if we are 'abroad', and if we leave the office at 6–7 p.m., we are mocked for having worked a 'half day'. Similarly, if our diet has food that is familiar, inexpensive and delicious, we think that it cannot work. We live in a world where normal is abnormal, unreal, revolutionary almost.

We must, however, normalize the sustainability of diets. The only diet to get on is the one you will keep for life. And that diet is eating *ghar ka khaana*. Quick fixes just don't work. *Sustainability is crucial for success*. It is about shifting slowly, sensitively and steadily towards progress. Whether it is in business with succession planning, or in health with weight-loss goals. Knee-jerk reactions are costly, both in the short and the long term.

Business articles often talk about how an effective leader is someone who can delegate, while a mediocre leader thinks he should save time and do everything himself. One article I read cites the practice of RSVP as an example. The mediocre leader thinks, 'Oh, it's just about one click, let me do it myself.' The visionary leader trains the executive assistant to do it. So it often is a time investment upfront, but in the long term you have saved yourself from a thousand clicks. With weight loss – and health in general – I call upon everyone to be a visionary.

A quick-fix diet that gets you to do a juice for three days, a detox for a week and a cleanse once every couple months, etc., may seem like a good strategy, but keeps you in the loop of dieting for life. I say, save yourself those one thousand RSVP clicks. Liberate yourself with some upfront investment in understanding what exactly you want changed about your body and why, and then build a strategy to get there w sustainable changes to food, exercise and lifestyle.

'Where do you see yourself five years from now?' is the most *faltu* question that anyone can ever ask of a young person when it comes to their work or ambitions. When people ask me that even today, I have no clue what to say. In my career, I couldn't have even dreamt of what life has bestowed me with. Not because I was too scared or timid to dream, but because I was very focused on my day-to-day work. If you keep your head down and your attention on the basics of work, you are able to navigate, upscale and up-skill by default. Though it's a useless question when it comes to your career, it's an important one to answer when it comes to your health and diet.

If five years from now you would like to eat normally and feel confident about wearing anything you feel like without having to worry about a paunch, bra fat and stubby thighs, then you have already signed up for sustainability. If five years from now you see yourself in the latest fasting spa/detox destination, washing up your guilt with *rang berangi* juices, scrolling on your phone to look at pics from five years ago where you looked bloody thin, then you like the diet drama and you can stop reading this book already. Unless, of course, you have had a change of heart, in which case please continue. I also don't want you to stop.

Let me break down what a sustainable (and hence successful) diet means.

### The diet should not change

No going on or off the diet. That phase doesn't exist. For this to happen the diet must be curated keeping in mind the culture, cuisine and climate you are born into and live in. It must also allow you to connect better with your community, and nothing that you enjoy communally must be in the 'not allowed' or 'avoid' list. Brazil in 2014 and the USA in 2020 put out evidence-backed dietary guidelines for healthy eating. They called upon their populations to eat according to their personal preferences, cultural traditions and budgetary constraints, while avoiding ultra-processed food products (biscuits, chocolates, juices, colas, etc.). Essentially, nutrition science is evolving from its prescriptive model of 'eat x gm

of protein, y per cent of fat', etc., towards a commonsensical 'dietary pattern'. A sustainable, sensible and simpler way to eating right and staying healthy.

## A dietary pattern

The quantities, proportions, variety or combination of foods and drinks typically consumed. The dietary pattern approach aims to place emphasis on the total diet as a long-term health determinant instead of focusing on separate foods and nutrients, which may interact with or confound each other.

The prescriptive model is alienating, the dietary pattern is inclusive of all food groups. The prescriptive model confuses people and makes eating a chore. The dietary pattern helps people connect, share and enjoy food, like we were always meant to. Essentially, the dietary pattern is sustainable; you don't count calories, grams, percentages, etc. You do the more basic stuff – choose wholesome, nutritious, fresh food. It has two important aspects:

- Eat more at home
- Eat less out of packets

It really does take as little as that. But sometimes we are averse to simple because we fail to realize that all intelligent designs are simple. Simplicity, as they say, is the ultimate form of sophistication – and I would like to add, of sustainability and success too.

### b) The diet should not have levels or phases

One of my clients would often have his sister on his call with our team. The sister would always have her audio on mute and video switched off. It always feels a little weird to be on those kind of calls but we are living in India, and if your client is the only boy in the family after two girls, then you learn to appreciate their need to do so. I have had many such clients. Typically, the boy will listen to everything and nod in agreement, but after the call is done or almost done, the sister will want to question you or bat on behalf of the brother, especially if you have pulled him up over something. This particular sister was very upset after the first call and said to my team that her brother could do better.

Basically, she was telling us to take off those kid gloves and not to give him a diet where he can eat what he wants. 'He's an adult, and he can do what it takes to get in shape,' she said.

What she meant was: punish him with a gruelling regime, have him start the day with *bhindi paani*, squeeze juice out of amla and ginger, eat only tempeh or sautéed tofu for dinner, etc. Now, we hate this boy-god situation as much as any sister in the world, but we don't take our revenge through food.

So we explained to her that this is the sustainable diet we want him to be on. We are not giving him a 'basic' diet first – morning, paratha; lunch, dahi-chawal; night, dal-chawal-sabzi, end meal with a banana – only to give him, in the next week, an 'advanced' diet of tempeh, arugula, cauli-rice, ajwain water, etc.

He had been there, done that, and it had left him constipated and cranky. In family dynamics like this, the god experiences the condition but the symptoms are felt by everyone else. If he clears his stomach, his mind will stay calm, he will feel happier, get healthier, and her interventions from Australia could stop. She was on board, and two weeks later, she stopped coming on the calls.

A diet that has phases, where you cleanse first, lean in with fruits later, go on to grilled chicken breast and broccoli or whatever next, is a disaster even before it starts. The first phase and the third or last phase or whatever you call it, have no similarity; they don't even look like books from the same library, forget about looking like pages of the same book.

**A sustainable diet attempts to be what it is meant to be till the end of time from day one.** Of course, it evolves and adapts to climate – a sherbet in summers instead of a laddoo; to occasions – a cake or a *sheera* as part of a celebratory meal, an extra paratha with friends, and so on. But its true nature stays. Authenticity is important for success.

### c) The diet should not be limiting

It should not be limited to just one goal – to lose weight, to reduce HbA1c (by reducing weight), to reduce back pain (by reducing weight) or to fit into that dress (by reducing weight). There is just so much more to life. Our parents are going to die, our children are going to leave us and we are going to see through our spouses. Life is going to give us a lot more

to cry about than not fitting into a dress that you could easily get into in 2018.

It's not all going to be gloomy either. A stranger will listen to your life story and change your perspective forever. You are going to get an unexpected upgrade, your song will shoot to the top of the charts, you are going to laugh till you fall at your friend's fortieth, your child will fall in love with you all over again, your partner will order your coffee exactly like you wanted it, you will get clear skies and see a reflection of the Kedar peak in Deoria Tal. A thousand wonderful things, big and small, will happen. The happiness of the scale dropping a few grams, kilos even, or you fitting into a size or two smaller, will fade in comparison.

There are two types of happiness: one that makes you happy every time you think about it, and one that makes you sad every time you think about it. Seeing a smaller number on the scale or fitting into a smaller dress size is the latter kind. Or at least most times it is. For happiness to be long lasting, it must be a consequence of something and not the main thing.

For example, when the happiness is of becoming the CEO, as a natural progression of the path you set yourself on, then it's cool, everlasting. But when 'being the CEO' is the main point, then someone beat you to it early in their career, their take-home is bigger than yours, their wife is skinnier, etc. Weight is like that. So is size. It's just incidental, and inconsequential in the face of everything you will live through and strive for.

### Ideal weight

Ideal weight is like the ideal husband – it doesn't exist. But the quest for it does. So, even after working with me since 2008, publishing at least three of my books, my editor said to me:

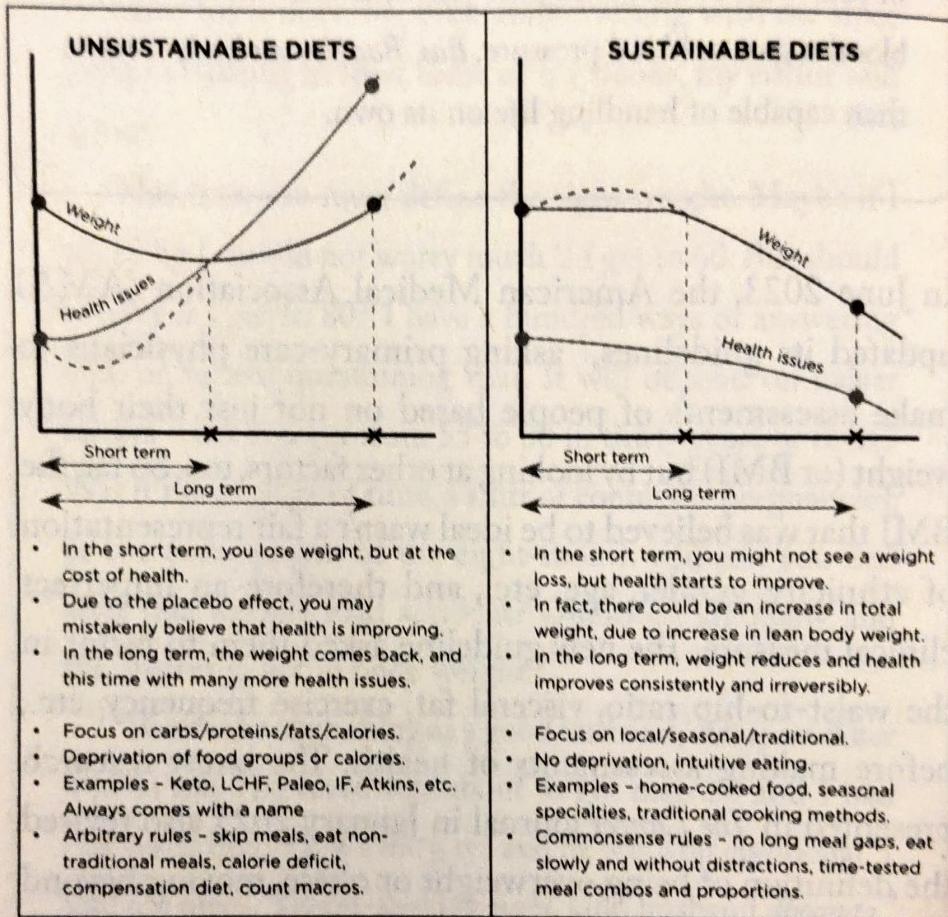
'This time you must define the right weight. Maybe if I am 55 kg I should not worry much if I get to 60. But should I worry if I get to 80?' I have a hundred ways of answering that, or, rather, questioning that. It will depend on hajaar factors – did you get from 55 to 80 in thirty years or three? Was it the passage of time, a shift of countries, pregnancies, or the consequence of the eight-month bed rest you had after that terrible road accident? Questions are many, the answer is not in body weight.

'There is no such thing as a good husband,' Anupam Kher said to me. His niece was about to get married and I had just asked him, 'How's the guy?' and he was a bit emotional. 'I told my niece, "Good-looking *nahi*, kind husband *dhoondo*." Waise, why do girls even need to get married these days? My niece can do everything on her own; in that sense she doesn't need a man or marriage, but kindness, Rujuta ji, we all need. I will never think that any man is good for my niece, but if she finds a kind man, someone who gets her point, is respectful of what she wants out of life, is not possessive, then that's all. *Toh haan*, the boy is kind. He understands her,' he said with sincerity.

So the answer to what is ideal weight is just this – **it should be weight that is kind to your body.** Doesn't get in your way, doesn't load your joints, doesn't throw off your blood sugars or blood pressure. *Bas. Baaki,* your body is more than capable of handling life on its own.

In June 2023, the American Medical Association (AMA) updated its guidelines,<sup>7</sup> asking primary-care physicians to make assessments of people based on not just their body weight (or BMI) but by looking at other factors, too. So far, the BMI that was believed to be ideal wasn't a fair representation of ethnicity, gender, age, etc., and therefore an imperfect clinical measure. The new guideline asked them to factor in the waist-to-hip ratio, visceral fat, exercise frequency, etc., before making assessments of health. The latest research presented in *The Lancet* journal in January 2025 also revised the definition of being overweight or obese, moving beyond body weight/BMI to now including more parameters like waist measurement, musculature, etc.

This is a chart I had made during the lockdown to highlight the differences between sustainable and unsustainable diets. I think you will find it useful.



## 4

## The real meaning of *ghar ka khaana*

Nutrition science started as a field to understand, intervene in and prevent malnourishment. More specifically, to stop the deformity and deaths that lack of nutrients produced. At least, that was its primary function. ‘Post industrialization, it changed a bit, and today it seems to have entirely played into the hands of the food industry,’ said a professor of biochemistry at a nutrition conference I was attending, back in 2012. ‘First they sold us readymade bread, then they put the fibre back in the dough and marked it up by 20 per cent, and now it’s the era of the gluten-free bread at a 40 per cent mark up.’

Nutrition science was always meant to be a public health service. When it moves away from that goal, science becomes sciency. But when it doesn’t, then it discovers over and over again that food isn’t just molecules. That eventually nutrition science is not complete without looking at climate, cuisine,

culture, crop cycle. That food is also a language of love, politics and even religion. That it is also about gender, economics and survival.

Today, as we saw in the last chapter, food or nutrition science is firmly establishing itself in your grandmom's philosophy of eating and living well. So, more than food groups, calories or portion control, dietary guidelines are establishing themselves in dietary patterns, i.e., the general eating habits or the food customs of a community or a region, etc. In short, *ghar ka khaana*.

### *Ghar ka khaana*

Food cooked at home, using ingredients that grow in a field around you (*local*), incorporating *seasonal* produce and using time-tested recipes and techniques (*traditional*).

The 80:20 ratio is an important rule of thumb and is applicable in many aspects of life. It's a useful tool for identifying the most important factors and focusing on them to improve results. Applied to business, it says that 80 per cent of your income will come from 20 per cent of your products, clients, services, etc. Applied to food, it means that to maintain good health, *80 per cent of what you eat must be ghar ka khaana* – food that is cooked in your kitchen and is consumed with, to borrow from Insta lingo, an attitude of gratitude. Local. Seasonal. Traditional. It is as simple as that.

## What's local?

In my first book, I had written how Shimla Baba had left me underwhelmed with his rather simple answer. I had met him in 2004 and had asked him, 'Who brought you here?'

He replied, 'The same one who brought you here.' This was in his cave in Tapovan, high above Gaumukh. '*Dhongi saala*', I thought to myself, only to realize years later that what he had said was the opposite of fake. It was the hard truth. It took me years to realize that simplicity is profound.

In 2022, I went on a much less demanding hike along the Prachin Badrinath *paidal marg*, the ancient trade and pilgrimage route to Badrinath from Rishikesh. On a bend along the river (opposite Taj Rishikesh), lives a baba. He has been there for years, and no one knows exactly when he came where he is from. So when my guide and I stopped by at *cutir*, I asked him, '*Aap kaha se ho?*'

My question seemed to have irked him. '*Kya matlab?*' he barked. '*Jaha ho, wahi ke ho.*' (Wherever you are now is where you belong.) My only growth from 2004 to 2022 was that I got that funda instantly. I was looking for an internet connection to check on my dad who wasn't keeping too well. That reality check was all I needed to put my phone back. You can't micromanage from a distance; you can either trek or be by the bedside. I had already made my choice.

Eating local means just that – eat according to where you are physically now. Don't let your screen transport you into eating or drinking some novel, expensive food that featured

in your favourite celeb's 'What I eat in a day' reel. Keep things real and grounded. Kanji over kombucha, rice over quinoa, mango over blueberries.

## The importance of local

Eating local is crucial for the health of the people and the planet. I think everyone understands that. But eating local is important for communities too. There is no chance of connecting, loving and accepting each other without sharing our *sukh-dukh* over food. The only time you can share is if you have something to offer, whether it's gossip or food. I am sure there's some study somewhere that says that people who share gossip and food are more intelligent or successful, or that it is linked to our evolution or it is what separates us, *Homo sapiens*, from the rest of the animal kingdom. Our ability to laugh, grieve, love and connect over food.

One of my share market clients – sharp as a knife she is – often tells me that the equity market is not risky but the increasing longevity and the loneliness it can potentially bring is. You may have enough to eat, but who will you share it with? One of the biggest things that dieting takes away from us is the ability to eat freely, and therefore share fearlessly and live fully.

IMHO, the reason why we live in a polarized world today is because we are all caught in the web of grabbing more protein per calorie, avoiding sugar at all costs and sneaking in more avocado for good fat. Our ability to appreciate each

other's food, and therefore POV, is gone. Looked down upon even. We only eat with those who eat like us – at 2 p.m., or clean, or keto.

The echo chamber depletes us of our energy, not body fat. Local food, hearty laughter, disagreements that don't last beyond a day, are the need of the hour. *Lassi aur ladai jitni badhao utni badh sakti hai*. Give me an equivalent of wisdom, reciprocation and de-escalation with broccoli or Greek yoghurt.

Local means inclusivity. It means not reducing food to its nutrients (Michael Pollan calls it nutritionism, like ageism, sexism, racism, etc.) but celebrating it for all its glory. One of the easy ways to decide what is local to you is to check if it has a name in your mother tongue or in the regional language. This is a crucial test.

A name in the local language means that not just you, but also the bees, the butterflies and the birds of the region recognize it as food. Embracing local means embracing our identity, our uniqueness, our differences. And empowering our diets with the crucial ingredient that diets rob us of – diversity. Diverse diets are the need of the hour. Nutrition science knows that diverse diets that are in sync with the culture, climate and crop cycles are the best carriers of all nutrients. All nutrients, including the ones considered to be scarce, like protein, folic acid or magnesium.

But it takes a certain amount of scientific temper and distance from social media to understand this truth. Or else we just spend our time hopping from one diet to another,

moving far away from *ghar ka khaana*. Local food, home food, nurturing food becomes the enemy in the name of science. If there is a definition of irony, this is it.

### Boston–Bangkok–Bangalore

I had written in 2009 about how quinoa, the latest superfood, is not something you needed to be on and how dal-chawal could serve you just as well. It's 2024, quinoa is still around and one of my clients' mom had just taken cooking classes and made a quinoa–raspberry salad. My young client had relished it, but I had marked it in red on her weekly recall sheet. She wanted to know why. 'Why is it in red – it's healthy, right? Fibre and veg protein.'

'Fibre and veg protein ke hundred options you ! your diet.'

'But then, what's the problem with quinoa?' she asked. So I told her about the *Boston–Bangkok–Bangalore formula*. If something is available across all cities globally, is known by the same name and for the same nutrients, don't eat it. Rucola, arugula, avocado, chia, almond milk, olive oil – all fall in the same category.

When the rich across the globe obsess over the same food, it means change of land usage for the poor. Quinoa, for example, is the food of native South American people. But now, with the global rich wanting it, a lot of their land that is under cultivation has to be dedicated to quinoa, often at

the cost of rotating crops and growing diverse species. Then there's also predatory pricing, where farmers are forced to sell the crop to middlemen and at a price they fix, much like drug cartels. Fibre for one, fear for another.

Same with chocolates. On the Ivory Coast, for example, the cocoa trees are being planted by burning down old forests. Then there is the ethical issue of children being employed to pick the cocoa, often at the cost of school and education. All this to keep the price at a certain point and profits at another.

We are all children of the same earth, our resources are shared. That is what *vasudhaiva kutumbakam* means. Take only what is needed and live within your ecological means. So, my young client, who studied in Tufts and lives in Kolkata, doesn't have to give up on quinoa, she only needs to recognize it as fancy food and not eat it solely for nutrients. But she can eat it as a fancy food, something you eat to show off, or as an occasional indulgence. Regulated to once a month max. Same with avocado toast, dark chocolate, chia pudding, etc., ok? Now breathe.

## How Anushree stopped fighting with her mom

Anushree Reddy, the trailblazing designer, is one of my clients. Sitting in my office, sipping on kokum sherbet, she said to me in her Hyderabadi accent, 'Rujuta, I was so scared at first. Idli in the morning, rice for lunch, palli (peanuts) with coffee and some more rice for dinner. I was not eating any carbs earlier and still I was not losing any weight, and then I thought so much carbs, what will happen now? And now I am losing weight, inches, my cravings are down, my parents are happy, you know.'

'Earlier my mother would call and ask, "What will you eat for Sunday lunch?" Once I would go there, we would be fighting because I wouldn't touch anything she had cooked. My dad was just so fed up. Now I tell them, make what you want, and I am eating, enjoying.'

I am not a client-facing designer, full time I am working at the factory. You know how that is – it's a mess. And full of stress. Everyone is screaming. But now I am screaming less. And right now, when all of Hyderabad is down with chikungunya, I am slogging at the factory and nothing, nothing has happened to me. First when I was on low carb, no carb, weight I am not losing, but the first infection person in Hyderabad is me.'

'Oh! Anushree, I want to quote you in my book,' I said.

'Ya, ya please, with my full name and details please.'

So go and buy her great stuff from Linking road, Khar, right next to my office.

## What's seasonal?

In India we recognize six specific seasons and six specific tastes – Vasanta, Grishma, Varsha, Sharata, Hemanta and Shishira (Spring, Summer, Rains, Autumn, Pre-winter and Winter) are the seasons. Madhura, Tikhta, Kashaya, Katu, Amla and Lavana (sweet, bitter, astringent, pungent, sour and salty) are the tastes. The seasons are called *ritus* and tastes are *rasas* in Sanskrit. The belief is that you need to nurture all tastes in your life to enjoy good health and relish every season.

When people go on diets, it's the seasonal variations that get hit. Invariably, your mojo, moods and immunity sinks. This happens at both ends of the scieny and satvik spectrum. Deprivation, monotony and boredom is the bottom line and there's almost no room left for sunshine, rain or snow.

*Bharatiya sanskriti* isn't just about celebrating the diversity in the seasons with different foods, but also with different parts of the same plant based on the season. So there will be tender *haldi achaar* with lemon in the spring, a haldi-dominant sweet with ghee in the winters (*adadhiyo*) and a haldi-leaf-wrapped coconut-and-rice delicacy for you to savour in the rains (*patoli*). Quite different from the *haldi paani* or the curcumin pill for immunity and eye health.

Or turning carrots into *kali gajar kanji*, fresh carrot achaar and *gajar halwa* – a pungent, tangy and sweet way to welcome winter. We have traded this for the daily dose of ABC juice. This is like turning ₹1 lakh into ₹12,000 – *laakh na baar hajaar kari deedha*, which is an old Gujarati saying for settling for

something much lesser because of your inability to see the value in what you already have. (Turn to page 216 to see a table of foods illustrating this point).

The neem flower is a sherbet of the spring, its leaves ka chutney a *prasad* on Gudi Padwa (the new year for many regions in India) and the bitter-sweet fruit, nimboli, a treat that kids in Pind of Punjab would look forward to. The millets too are consumed as per the season, as we discovered in the previous section.

You get my drift, right? Kalidasa wrote about ritus, Gulzar sahab composed couplets about them, your grandmom cooked according to it, but you have sold your soul and *dimaag* to viral trends. Well done. ₹1 lakh to ₹12,000. It's just like what @aiyoshraddha says – you need many mornings in one day because you need to take moringa powder, an amla shot, *paani*, apple cider vinegar, etc.

The intelligence that you may find the neem leaves bitter but won't mind its fruit or prefer its sherbet is gone with the wind. And the wind is polluted. Because when cultures lose cuisine, the crop cycle is challenged. Land use changes, and only cash crops that fit the BBB formula get prominence, at the cost of local fare. That's how we are losing the seasonal delicacies of our regions. Or else we would be sipping on *kulith kalan* in summers in Goa and eating a *gehat paratha* in the winters in Rishikesh.

Now, regardless of when and where you holiday, it is the same two-minute noodles by the roadside and the same almond milk latte in posh cafes. Seasonal food practices

and rituals were intact and in place until just about thirty years ago. The late nineties came with economic reforms and liberalization, and it helped us to get where we are now. We are better off today, yes, but we didn't fully anticipate the cuisine losses that it would bring.

## What's traditional

In its simplest form, it means cooking food at home using time-tested recipes. The highlight of traditional food is that it is diverse and requires eating in set combinations. It puts to good use all the ingredients that are available in the season and the region, and uses culinary art and wisdom to turn them into meals that are both delicious and nutritious. The combinations differ, based on whether you are celebrating, grieving or simply having a regular day. **Food is used as a medium that acts as an interface between you and your circumstances.** It is used to temper sadness, enhance happiness and embrace the vagueness of a routine life

Eating traditional food has one constraint though – most of it is taught orally. It is handed down over generations and its context/greatness, like love, is hidden in plain sight. But we are fast losing not just languages but also the nuances of it. 'When was the last time someone spoke to you in a *muhawara*?' asked Javed Akhtar at a literary event recently.

When skill and sophistication with language are lost, it has an impact on our kitchens too. The special dishes cooked

on certain days are now forgotten, and their recipes are hard to come by. Everything of value is now said only in English, and we live in a world where traditional either signals exotic or backward. Loss of languages has meant loss of fluency and ease in our eating and living.

## But isn't traditional food fattening?

People genuinely believe that we no longer have the luxury of eating food in a commonsensical or uncomplicated manner because we are no longer burning the calories we used to. This, in fact, is the most widely used argument against local, seasonal and traditional food – that unlike our ancestors, we are not active enough. We are not walking around, foraging, hunting, or even cleaning, sweeping and washing the way we used to before. And since we don't live like them, we cannot eat like them.

However, scientific experiments using the doubly labelled water method – the gold standard to measure calories burned daily in normal life (energy expenditure) – have, proved that sedentary city dwellers in the West, traditional farmers in South America and hunter-gatherers in Africa pretty much burn the same calories per day.

But we are so taken in by the 'move-more-burn-more' dogma that we don't stop to think if it stands the test of empirical data, critical thinking or experimental evidence. By the way, even animals in labs or zoos have the same

daily calorie expenditure as those in the wild. In fact, when differences in individuals are measured, couch potatoes burn only about 200 calories less than people who make it a point to exercise and stay active. So yes, all those videos that told you that if you eat first at a *shaadi* and then dance, it burns the calories, are lies. As are viral tweets that blame 'Indian food' for the obesity epidemic.

As humans, we evolved uniquely, developing traits that required a lot of calories<sup>8</sup> (also known as the basal metabolic rate [BMR]), just to keep functioning. And our cooking, or cuisine, evolved as a sophisticated, clever way to provide the body – and especially the brain – with the calories it needs. Not just to survive but to thrive. Metabolism is much more complex than calories in and out, or whatever else that it has been reduced to.

### Don't count

One of my clients is a young boy in his twenties, just back from studies and already in daddy's retail business. A fat teen, he worked very hard to lose weight when he was studying in Dublin. But now that he was back, he was having a hard time keeping it off. 'I try and keep my calories low,' he told me. 'I calculate return on calories, so steak is the best and fries are the worst,' he continued. He had returned during the shraadh period. 'So yesterday it was grandpa *ka shraadh*. My bua lives very close, and today she asked me to come

over. It was her grandmother-in-law ka shraadh and she's just passed away last year and I wasn't there. In fifteen days, I have had four shraadh meals.' (These tend to be big meals with poori, kheer, etc., and the belief is that everything must be eaten and nothing left on the plate.)

'Ah! Very Indian problems you are having,' I said to him. He was a single child but from a big joint family. 'I am sure you will take your dad's business places, but what will enrich your life is connecting to your culture, community and even climate. And food is a good place to start. You understand these valuable Cs and it will help you with the R.'

'Returns?' he asked.

'Retail,' I replied.

'But RD, *calories toh calories hai na?*'

'Yes, but not at the cost of overlooking culture, climate, cuisine, community. Both steak and fries are useless on these parameters.'

'So don't eat both?'

'Eat them. But occasionally, and don't sweat the shraadh, Dussera, Diwali meals. If you must use calories as a measure, use the other Cs too.'

He had studied Operations Research (using mathematics to optimize processes), so we decided that all these Cs would get equal weightage.

'Sounds good.'

I would like calories out of the picture entirely, but I am mature, so I count a win when I have one. The next time

around when he ate, he would not make the mistake of only counting numbers. Or looking at the merits/demerits of anything on just one data point.

We even added more Cs to food over time. So if he asked for a meeting, he just eats whatever his client or supplier is eating – *connection*. Good for business. If a store has done exceptional business and the store manager calls for samosa and jalebi – eat with everyone. *Celebration*. Good for business. If you know a tough customer likes Mysore paak, carry it and offer it and eat it – and gain some personal *credit*. Good for business. You wanna *patao* a girl, eat what she's eating – *chivalry*, good for the business of life. Long story short, live your life outside the box of calories.

We don't need to shift away from traditional diets, but we need policy intervention to fix the obesogenic environment we live in – the unchecked penetration of junk food, the unwalkable cities and towns, the polluted air, depletion of green spaces, the list really is endless.

## 5

## The three rules of eating *ghar ka khaana*

Like all languages, *ghar ka khaana* has its own grammar and rules. These rules aren't written in stone; they evolve with time, but you must understand them to appreciate them. They are more like a framework, and within that framework you are free to do as you please. If you have learnt a classical art form – dance, singing or playing an instrument – then you know what I mean. These frameworks are in place like a safety guard, to ensure that you don't hurt yourself or anyone else in the process.

Similarly, the rules of *ghar ka khaana* ensure that your eating has depth. That it is not merely an act of consumption but *there is adequate attention to digestion, absorption, assimilation and excretion*.

When these rules are followed, the entire body feels rejuvenated and refreshed. You spend less time thinking and strategizing how to optimize protein or anything else and

more time enjoying and living life. These rules work in the background, and eating right becomes a set pattern, a default. It ensures that without needing to constantly calculate, you eat right.

Now, spelling out food rules is a bit like explaining how the rose smells. But my editor refuses to publish the book without it, so this is me trying my best to give you some guidelines to work with. They come with a disclaimer – that you will truly understand and appreciate them only after a lifetime of practice. There's a reason why the old works, because it is fresh every time you encounter it, like a hot cup of chai.

So here are the three food rules or three ways in which *ghar ka khaana* works.

### **e 1: Eat in the right combinations**

The greatness of *ghar ka khaana* comes from the combinations we eat it in. It's teamwork. You can think of *food combinations* as *mangroves that prevent you from getting swept away by trends and viral videos*. These combos ensure that active ingredients of food are delivered with love and care, and in commonsense ways that have stood the test of time.

Let's look at a few examples (some we have come across in the book earlier).

Haldi may have curcumin and it may have anti-inflammatory properties, but it works best when consumed in combinations like the *haldi-doodh* when you are feeling a

bit low, in the tadka as a routine practice, the *haldi sabzi and roti* in the winters, and so on.

Millets today may have the recognition because they got the government's push, but for them to be truly as nutritious as they can be, their combinations must be respected. A thumb rule for all millets is that they must be mixed with dairy fat – milk, makhan or ghee. In the absence of these, millets are heavy to digest. They are also routinely eaten with chutneys like peanut, til, flaxseed, garlic, etc., an infusion of seeds and spices to ease digestion.

There is another unwritten rule – that when you turn them into laddoos or barfi, you always use jaggery, and not sugar. Bajra has this rule that even if you just eat a *rotla* or a *bhakri*, you must eat or finish the meal with a piece of jaggery.

Similarly, there are rules for mixing grains and pulses too. I remember, a long time ago, before gluten was a thing, there was a food festival at Carter Road. I went to the SNDT University (my alma mater) food stall. The girls there had made rajma paratha. 'What's that?' I wondered. 'Boil the rajma, mash it, pack it inside the wheat atta like aloo, and voila, rajma paratha is ready.'

I know how you are taught to think in nutrition schools. You have to somehow increase the protein content of a food by making combinations that never even existed, like rajma paratha. You do some random calculations on paper, and there it is. You never have to think of digestibility or useability; for how long this paratha stays palatable, let alone tasty, after it is made. Food on paper is different from food in the pet or inside the stomach.

Actually, we should be taught how to increase protein digestibility in foods like rajma–chawal, a combination that has always existed. It is easy to digest and a delicacy for lazy Sunday afternoons. You can even reheat rajma and eat it with another batch of rice. And you can add a *boondi raita* or a *chaas* or plain dahi for improved protein, etc.

But we are trained from the nutrient aspect, without keeping the end user or design viability in the picture. Because in real life, outside of the lab, when you tell your client to have a glass of *chaas* with the rajma–chawal, he's burping and farting less and feeling lighter. And recommending you to his friends and family for easy tips that got him thin. This also how you make money.

But to be honest, rajma–chawal with raita or *chaas* is also a combination that has always existed. So you can't really learn anything new in a nutrition school, but you can learn the value and the practicality of old foods. You can learn why time-tested combos work even in present times. You can design experiments that have you checking on people for at least twenty-four hours, post their consumption of your recommended meal and not just calculate protein or calories on paper and then score marks for the most protein in lowest calorific value. We can be real and learn 'most protein with least farts in 24 hours', but that's a topic and a rant for another day.

So the thumb rule here is that the big pulses – like rajma and chana – are mixed with rice, and the smaller ones – like lobia, moong and matki – have the flexibility to go with rice, roti or millets.

### Peas and meat alternatives

When I started working, people on diets would avoid peas because they were thought of as fattening. Just like they would avoid ghee or rice and have sukhā roti instead. But now roti is gluten, and hence bad. Rice was once just starch and hence bad, but now it is resistant starch, a prebiotic, hence good. Ghee was fat, hence bad. Now it's short-chain fatty acids, fat-burning, hence good. Same with peas.

First, they were high-calorie, hence bad. Now they are vegan protein, hence good. '*Ab, yeh last village nahi ma'am, first village hai,*' my driver Chinu said about Mana, the last village after Badrinath.

'*Yeh, kab hua?*'

'PM visit ke baad,' he said. Rebranding is not just in dieting.

The backlash to excessive consumption of meat has been to look for more kind, sustainable sources of protein. But what we got instead is the same companies that sell us dairy and meat, selling us almond milk, mock meat, 3D-printed lamb, etc. Eating animal protein is not unsustainable when done in time-tested portions, proportions and frequency (more on that later). And eating non-dairy, alternative meats that are highly processed isn't the answer either.

## Rule 2: Eat food in the right proportions

The proportion of every ingredient in the kitchen is pre-fixed. Inclusivity at its best – ensuring that no one ingredient gets to dominate the food plate at the cost of the other.

Some proportions are very obvious, and we all know them – for khichdi it is 3:1 of rice and moong dal, for idli 2.5:1 and for dosa 3:1 of rice and urad dal. This is how you would get light meals, food that leaves you satiated, that allows you to sleep well, wake up in the morning and exercise. The protein fixation has changed this to about 2:1 in recent times, but the thumb rule – that grains or millets should be in a significantly higher ratio than pulses or legumes – stays.

Eating in the right proportion would mean that your meal/plate will have grains or millets, along with the legumes or dals, and then a cooked sabzi that is almost the same proportion as dal (or slightly lesser). The accompaniments – like the salad, chutney, achar or raita – together cannot be more than the amount of the cooked sabzi. This makes for a complete meal (check the chart on page 150). One that is gentle on your stomach, bandwidth and pocket. A meal that gives you not just fibre, protein, fat and magnesium, but also your vitamin B and C, zinc, anthocyanins, etc.

Your favourite keto or protein diet proponent asking you to take 30 grams of fibre and 30 grams of fat along with 30 grams of protein is a poorer version of these time-tested proportions. ₹1 lakh to ₹12,000.

The timeless method of proportions doesn't just lend itself to being positioned as wholesome. In fact, it makes for the very definition of boring/gharelu food. But just as love bombing is a red flag, protein bombing or good-bacteria bombing is a red flag too. Green flags in relationships are more like texts that that read – done, cool, send OTP. **Routine love and meals are very boring.** They have the chemistry but not the volatility.

Proportions, combinations, seasons keep interacting with each other all the time to create diversity in all traditional diets. Like jowar is a millet of the summers, but in parts of Maharashtra, it is used in the 3:1 proportion with black urad dal along with one teaspoon of methi seeds to create the bhakri of the winters.

The Himalayan region has a similar ritual of making *paratha* – made with horse gram and wheat atta – to stay warm at the peak of winter. So-called ‘heaty’ and ‘cooling’ foods are mixed in pre-set proportions to add diversity to cooking and optimize nutrient delivery in the most delicious ways.

A Gujarati client of mine had grown up in Sudan and had married in Ahmedabad. She would make a delicious aam pickle with chana in it – a legacy of the land she grew up in. Intelligent use of resources (local and seasonal produce) in the kitchen is one of the most creative ways to make diets healthy, affordable and accessible.

New age health influencers don't get this. They are filled with rigid ideas of what makes for heaty or cooling foods. No course, however long, can teach you everything you need to learn. Which is why in real life, whether your qualification is

for seven years, months or days, you must learn to listen. You must adapt and respect living traditions and appreciate the tweaks they come with.

From millets to grains, from legumes to pulses, from wild vegetables to the ones cultivated, from nuts to seeds, from spices to herbs, from wild fruits to those carefully nurtured, from milk to meat, the Indian kitchen has proportions in which all these are eaten. Through meals that gently remind us that we are just a part of the whole. Food, in India, is not medicine for a disease but a reflection of the divinity that lies within each one of us. If diversity, inclusivity and oneness had a name, it would be *dal-chawal-ghee*.

*Pee halad aani ho gori* (Drink a lot of haldi and turn fair overnight) is a Marathi idiom reeking of sarcasm and mocks the gullible who use large doses of a food product to fix something. It is a not-so-gentle reminder that the power of food can only be harnessed optimally with unwritten kitchen rules, the most important of which is proportion. Everything in the right amount heals, and too much hurts. Even if it's just *paani aur pyaar*.

### The Saif way to eat meat

One of the things that is strictly proportioned in the classical Indian diet is meat. Travel to the remote Himalaya and you will see how a whole village will share a goat or even a yak. Closer home, Maharashtra is probably most serious about the proportion in which meat, fish and even eggs will be

consumed. Through the month of Shravan, according to the lunar calendar, there's complete abstinence from meat, fish and even eggs. It compulsorily makes room for neglected vegetables, dals and even nuts, and brings about a refreshing change to the monotony in the kitchen. In fact, even on a regular basis, non-veg which also includes egg in the Indian context) is limited to just a few days of the week, mostly Wednesdays, Fridays and Sundays.

These are climate-resilient practices. Sustainability is ingrained in our DNA; it breathes through our culture and cuisine. Recently, the World Wildlife Fund declared that Indian diets are the most climate-friendly and sustainable, exactly for this reason. Even in parts of India where there are no such observances with meat (like in Maharashtra), it is consumed only as a part of the whole meal. It doesn't mean taking millets, rice, veggies, fruits and nuts, etc., off the plate. It simply exists along with everyone else.

Saif, who loves his holidays (he's the OG work-life balance ambassador) – UK in summers, Gstaad in winters – has an eating formula. He is predominantly vegetarian when at home in Mumbai and dominantly non-vegetarian when abroad. 'Because where else can you get the parwal, lauki, bhindi, turai, palak, chavli, etc.? And no one can make a great fish and chips or roast at home.'

**'But my doctor says'**

A client of mine was a politician. He was obese and desperate to lose weight. Late nights, skipped meals, large meals, stress, alcohol, smoking were all a part of his routine and some were occupational hazards. His lipid profile was a bit off, within range but at the higher end. He would eat only egg whites for breakfast, and I recommended that he have two whole eggs with a buttered toast when travelling, and chapati when at home.

'*Kaun hai yeh pagal dietitian?*' His doctor demanded to know after he heard that six egg whites were replaced with two whole eggs and chapati or toast. 'Will she take responsibility for your heart attack after all that yolk chokes your arteries?' Earlier in my career, some doctors have called me on the landline to fire me for asking their clients to eat ghee, rice, coconut, etc. They have demanded to know if I was out of my mind or have ever had my brain checked. One even offered to do it for free.

*But apne ko thappad se nahi, pyar se dar lagta hai.*

'Then what did he say?' I asked my client.

'After I said that I am now actually eating less at breakfast [earlier, after egg whites, he would eat one glucose biscuit ka packet and one glass of orange juice, freshly squeezed], my legs are not hurting in the night and am generally feeling light, the doctor got even more angry. He told me that the main thing was to lose weight, so just eat 1 kg of fruit for

breakfast and you will lose 10 kgs in a month. He has even allowed me any choice of fruits in the morning. 'Any time you will drop dead with this weight,' the doctor had declared. 'Will your dietitian come to save you?'

'No problem, *karo aap*,' I said to him (at least it wasn't advice to skip breakfast entirely). I have always been quite clear that clients who are already hassled with their health should not be bothered further. One kilogram of fruit in one day, and in just one meal, makes no sense. It would mean risking higher triglycerides levels over time, but I knew better than to say that to my client when he was already in the grip of fear. 'If you find yourself eating glucose biscuits, aching legs and poor sleep again, go back to eating like you were in the last three months' was the only advice I offered. That was our last meeting. I have learnt that you must honour your clients' trust in you to tell you things as they are and leave in a way that they are not intimidated or embarrassed if they have to approach you again.

The overreach of doctors and the under-reach of common sense while making food decisions continues to remain a high barrier for sustainable diets and fitness.

## Rule 3: Eat the right portions

So much is spoken about longevity these days, but in the noise we often forget that life is unpredictable and that eating with pleasure is a rare joy. We have made eating a painful activity, one where we are either second-guessing whether or not to go for the next bite or are rushing through it while scrolling through our feeds.

We are all scared of age and death. Almost everything we do in life, including the pursuit to lose weight or get fit, is an escape from this reality. But when reality hits us, we realize that we lose appetite with age and eventually a dead body cannot consume anything at all. We are here for a limited time, and while we are here we must make the most of our primal joy of food. Use it as a fuel to pursue all that we see and mean in.

My partner runs Connect with Himalaya and wrote a book on his Himalayan travels and its people and the culture. Much to his delight, he received an email from Bill Aitken, praising the book. One of our big moments for sure. Bill Aitken is Scottish, hitchhiked to India in 1959, fell in love with the Himalaya and an Indian princess, stayed back in the mountains and made Mussoorie his home. Along the way he wrote some of the best books on the Himalaya and India. In 2014, we visited him to thank him for his grand gesture and struck a friendship.

Every time we are around Mussoorie, GP tells me we must visit him – ‘Don’t know how many good years he has left.’ At

one such meeting I said to Bill, 'One time, let us take you out to lunch instead of eating at your home.'

'Good food,' he asked?

'Promise,' I said. I took both the boys to Padmini Niwas on the Mall Road. Guju thali is their specialty, but they are always kind enough to accommodate my request and make a few local delicacies too.

So there we were eating lunch – *mandua roti, gehat-stuffed poori, chainsu, palak kafli, Kumaoni raita, red rice, Gujarati dal, mooli thechwani, jhangora kheer*. And a special item – aloo-tamatar shaak. We ate and exchanged stories of bike rides, mystics, treks, and shepherds that appear and disappear into the fog. Where there is warmth, love and connection, the stomach dilates, the appetite is roused and everythin' tastier and even lighter.

But a lot more than the conversation, I was much taken by Bill's appetite. He ate everything on the plate and then asked for a second helping of jhangora kheer. Men with a robust appetite, who can eat with delight, are a turn-on for me. Not that this was a competition, but GP hadn't eaten half of what Bill had, and I had eaten only half of what GP had.

'*Hum log iske pehle tapkenge*,' I told GP. 'Your mountain man is going nowhere.' Later, Bill walked swiftly up the Mall Road. 'Ah, it was a good meal,' he said to me.

'Ah, you are a good man,' I said to him.

The brave and the creative have a voracious appetite for life. And it will reflect in their relationship with food too. Because what is food if not life?

## But how does one not overeat?

It takes time and even a leap of self-discovery, but you have to begin by trusting your ability to self-terminate the act of eating. We are all born with it but lose it to grabbing lunches, sending emails over breakfast and Netflixing dinners. And then of course, we just don't eat wholesome food because we are so scared of home food.

**The whole point is that if food is flavourful and nurtures all the six tastes, then you are likely to eat just the right quantities.** Or to put it in another way – a lot less than what you fear you will eat if food is delicious. And every time you try ‘tricking’ your stomach – by first having salad, then some protein, and lastly some carbs – you are going to open the ridge later looking for some low-volume, high-density, poor-nourishment calories. So you consume fewer calories at meal time only to overeat closer to your bedtime. Your ring is not going to be happy with you the next day.

Dr Badwe is known as ‘dev manus’, or God-figure, in Mumbai, thanks to his compassionate and caring work at Tata Memorial Hospital. We were together on a podcast for Tata trust on breast cancer awareness. He was talking about preventive measures – self-examination being one of them – and I was talking about food. During our chat he said we must realize that *there is a thin line between vigilance and anxiety*. By all means be vigilant about your breasts, about your health, but don’t be anxious. First learn what a normal breast feels like in every phase of your menstrual cycle, because otherwise

everything is going to feel like a lump and that's not helpful at all. I wanted to stand up and applaud.

The thing about people with a solid practice is that they make the complex easy, within reach of all of us to grasp. So when it comes to portions too, be vigilant and not anxious. And just like how the breast will look and feel different depending on the phase of your menstrual cycle, the appetite will differ too. The changes are mild, but if you lose track of your normal appetite, you will always feel like you are eating too much. So you go about most of your days under-eating, only to overeat a cheesecake, a chocolate pastry and a tub of ice-cream during PMS. Remember that high variance, whether in a performance or a person, in pleasure or pain, breast or bhukh, should get flagged.

### The Jordan formula

If you still need more clues on how much to eat, then try the Jordan formula. I was in Amman for a YPO talk, and I learnt of a beautiful Arabic tradition. Your host will welcome you with Arabic coffee and dates, and you take one of each.

Your host will goad you to have another one; *manvar, agrah*, indulging you with food, nudging you to eat just a little more, is a part of every culture. An exchange of warmth and love.

But in the Arabic tradition, you must refuse the second date and coffee if you think you cannot have the third one. This, I feel, is such a beautiful way to relish what one eats and

not overdo it. And the framework is open – have the second one if you can also have the third one. The fourth one if you can have the fifth. But if you can't, stop at the odd number, don't go even.

## Mental Meal Map

When the eyes become clear, the body healthy and the appetite increases, it's a sign of success, according to the *Yoga Pradipika*. No wonder, then, that when you do portion-control, force yourself to eat less, mask your appetite with tea, coffee, chewing gum, soups and fibre gels, success, even on the path of weight loss, becomes elusive.

And so we have the Mental Meal Map to our rescue, a simple tool that anyone can use to understand their appetite and learn how much to eat.

It has four steps:

- Step 1 – Visualize how much would you like to eat
- Step 2 – Serve yourself half of that amount
- Step 3 – Take double the time to eat the meal
- Step 4 – If still hungry, start again from Step 1

Start using the Mental Meal Map for at least one main meal every day. The Mental Meal Map is also extremely useful when you are eating out in restaurants or at weddings and party buffets.

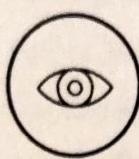
## HOW MUCH TO EAT?

### Portions and Proportions

#### Portions

- Appetite varies due to many factors
- Can't fix a portion size as standard

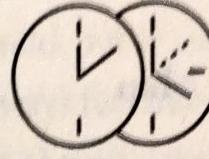
Instead, use the **Mental Meal Map**



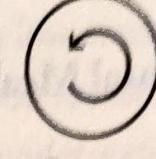
1 Visualise how much you want to eat



2 Serve yourself half of that amount



3 Eat slowly and take double the time

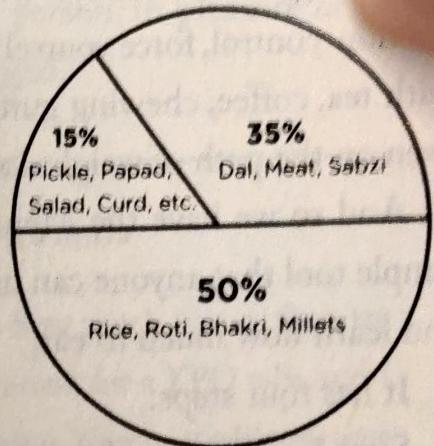


4 If still hungry, start from Step 1

#### Proportions

- All time-tested meals have roughly a 3:2:1 proportion of grains: dal/sabzi: pickle/salad/curd
- This allows for optimum digestion and assimilation of nutrients

Use the **Meal Proportion Map** for your meals



There is a time-tested formula for 'how to eat' also – the cornerstones of which are 'sit, silence, senses, slow'. I recommend you practice this 4S formula too. Start with once a week, build it to once a day, and soon enough, in all your meals you will stop eating before you get full.

Bhimsen Joshi, the greatest Indian classical singer ever, was also known for his love for cars and driving. Once he was

on the road with Sudhir Gadgil, a well-known compere. The side-view mirror of the Mercedes that Panditji was driving almost brushed against a truck. Gadgil ducked out of fear for his life. '*Ghabru naka Gadgil, chukun sadi la haath lagel pan maandi touch honar nahi.*' (Don't worry Gadgil, I may brush against a saree in my oversight but will never go as off-track as touching the thigh.) That's the power of the daily *riyaaz*, lesser errors whether with food or sur.

### See what you eat vs showing what you eat

On my Instagram, I often post pics of my food plate. First thing people notice is that it is silver.

'How does she eat so little?' Is the other thing they say. What you see is all there is (WYSIATI) is a common bias of the mind.<sup>9</sup> (Read *Thinking, Fast and Slow* by Daniel Kahneman.) Only with age and experience does one learn that there is more to see than what is being shown (be it a house hunt, job hunt or simply a first date). Displays are often a distraction from the real deal – we know that, but we forget it when we are on social media. When I click pictures of my thali, I place my food in a manner that looks attractive. It depicts the proportions in which I eat but not necessarily the portions. I plate my food in a manner that there is space between every item, so that every

preparation is seen clearly. And after I am done posting, I will help myself to second helpings. I have explained this often, but maybe it's time to carry this disclaimer: 'Pic for representation purposes only. Doesn't depict the actual meal size of the said individual. You are encouraged to eat as per your appetite, and while you are at it may we also ask you to put your phone aside?'

# 6

## What's not *ghar ka khaana*

### - the *anti-ghar ka khaana*

What is that one food whose consumption is growing fastest in the world amongst Indian youth? What is that one food which is directly linked to every single non-communicable disease, from diabetes to blood pressure to cancer and mental health? Actually, it is a trick question because the food in question – UPF (ultra-processed foods) – is not even real food.<sup>10</sup>

When Brazilian food scientist Carlos Monteiro and his team were researching the cause behind the obesity epidemic in Brazil, they came across a strange fact – households with more amount of salt, butter, sugar, in their kitchens, were in general healthier than others. This flew in the face of the conventional wisdom of that time – that the culprits were some problem nutrients in the food we consumed. What gives?

The presence of salt, sugar and butter was an indicator that those households were cooking more at home and eating less packaged and processed foods. This was one of

the many facts that eventually led the team to come out with the NOVA classification of foods, where for the first time nutrition science clearly stated that it is the processing that is the problem, not the individual nutrients.

### The NOVA classification

It is a framework that divides all the foods we eat into four categories based on the amount of processing they undergo.

Group I, includes 'unprocessed or minimally processed foods', like whole fruits and vegetables, grains, millets, beans and legumes, nuts, milk, eggs and cuts of meat.

Group II, or 'processed culinary ingredients', include cooking oils, butter, lard, sugar and salt.

Group III, or 'minimally processed foods', are often made by combining group I and group II ingredients into things like homemade breads, desserts, sautés, canned fish, bottled veggies and other dishes.

Group IV, or 'ultra-processed foods', are defined as formulations of ingredients that result from a series of industrial processes, including dyes, flavours, emulsifiers, certain sugars like fructose and other ingredients *rarely or never found in home kitchens*. This includes foods such as breakfast cereals, soft drinks, energy drinks, juices, and packaged snacks like chips, biscuits, cookies, reconstituted meat products, instant noodles, breads, frozen or long-shelf-life meals, etc.

Technical classification aside, here is my practical classification of food into four categories:

- **Group 1 – Home food:** food cooked in your kitchen, using a medley of ingredients that are a combination of fresh and perishable (veggies, milk products, etc.,) and non-perishables (millets, grains, legumes, pulses, spices, seeds, etc.). Ingredients that come together when cooked to reflect family and regional heritage and individuality. Food that calls your name, food that you return home to; food that is simple and uplifting.

*As we discussed earlier, home food should be 80 per cent of all the food that you eat. For the remaining 20 per cent, check below.*

**Group 2 – Gourmet food:** Food that you eat in posh restaurants/cool cafes or call for at home or have a chef cater for you. Food that you have developed a taste and liking for but isn't from your region or even the continent. But this food, too, is honest to the time-tested rules of the cuisine it belongs to.

- **Group 3 – Fun food:** Food that is world-famous in your region, not available anywhere else, has a local name. It's the street food of your region (and sometimes you make it at home, too). It makes you feel good when you eat it, has no ads but all the rich and famous of your area eat there/eat it. It isn't expensive but is not cheap either and, with time, the price may have gone up.

- **Group 4 – Junk food:** Food that is available globally, but now adapted to local taste buds, using masala formula, etc. Has ads, jingles, celeb endorsements, aggressive marketing and pricing to maximize reach. It is cheap and, with time, the price stays the same, but the size of the pack may have reduced (shrinkflation). Profit at the bottom of the pyramid.

*The 20 per cent non-ghar ka khaana should mostly be from the fun and gourmet food categories, keeping the junk food to the bare minimum if you can't entirely avoid it.*

## Mother's love

My client was a young Kutchi boy working in the Bay Area – big money, pretty wife but *saala IBS se jeena haraam*. Slowly and steadily, we had worked at it, and now he had predictable motions, better digestion and reduced pain. Then the Covid lockdown lifted and his parents travelled to meet him. His mother carried with her his favourite bakarwadi. I planned for him to eat one every evening at chai time with his parents.

'I don't understand how you allow this,' said his wife to me. Some rich wives scold the consultants instead of their husbands. '*Aap toh videos mein kehte ho, jitna packet khulta hai, utna pet fulta hai.* Our basement is full of junk food but I was not saying anything to him. *Khane do jitna khana hai*, once the program starts, he has to stop.'

'See Mamta, he's not eating that junk food at all. But what his mother has brought is not just bhakarwadi. *Yeh pyaar, mohabbat aur ashirwaad hai.* Our parents are not with us forever, *ek time aisa bhi ayega ke apna favourite khaana laane wala ya even jaan ne wala koi nahi rahega.* Now he's eating just one a day, at a specific time, sipping chai with Mummy. It will be such a feel-good factor even for her that he's able to eat his favourite food and not make a run to the loo. It will boost her confidence about her son's health, it will teach him that one is good, two is too much. And one week *ke baad*, he won't even feel like eating it, so don't stress.'

The thing is that people often wonder how much is too much. The answer to that question is that **everything that is mindless is too much**, even if it's just one bite or scoop. So even when it comes to 'packaged food', if it's the specialty of your region, if you are sharing it with your own people, if its evoking nostalgia, love, laughter and tears, by all means go ahead and indulge.

But if it's packaged food that's available globally, that someone put in your room or flight seat as a freebie, that you are mindlessly chomping on because you are bored or watching TV, stop yourself. It's a no-brainer, really.

### Food politics

We often use food to send a message – all the time, really. When we deprive ourselves of the foods we love, we tell ourselves that we are not worthy enough. When we allow ourselves the food we eat, even an extra helping, we tell ourselves that we are open to love and that we trust ourselves.

When we stop someone from accessing food that a loved one has sent/prepared, even if it's for 'health' reasons, we are simply being passive-aggressive. And we are being silly, petty too. But by allowing our partners to eat what their friends and families have got for them, we allow them the ability to receive love from all the ones who matter. We cannot possibly be everything to one person – parent, partner, child, bff, etc. It may be a romantic idea, but it is exhausting. It puts too much pressure on us and on the relationship.

My relationship advice to the young people I work with is just this – *khaane and khilaanewala ladka/ladki/family dhoondo. Baaki paisa, naam, hum khud kama sakte hain magar pyar se khilaanewale log important asset class hain.*

*For a list of junk foods and their health-washed versions, see table on page 219.*

*Ghar ka khaana*

a.k.a

**Home-cooked food**

a.k.a

**Dietary pattern**

a.k.a

**Local, seasonal, traditional**

a.k.a

**The commonsense diet**

## 7

# The food plan you can depend on

Ergonomics was one of my favourite subjects at college. Sports science and nutrition was then a newly launched course. Mine was the first batch, textbooks were non-existent, and we were dependent on external faculty to teach a whole lot of subjects – exercise physiology, ergonomics, sport psychology, etc. For ergonomics, we would go to the Industrial Development Centre at IIT-Bombay.

The whole point of ergonomics is to improve efficiency while reducing energy expenditure. This was late nineties, and I have literally watched experiments at the centre where doing *jhadu-katka* (mopping) changed from a sitting to a standing position. It allowed for more area to be covered, cleaned almost as well as the more classical squat down and reduced energy expenditure for the worker. A less tired worker is always a good thing. If the activity is not exhausting, compliance is better and efficiency is improved. So, how heavy

a bat needs to be for hitting a sixer, how tall a chair should be for women workers, etc., is all ergonomics.

But why I am telling you this is because Mumbai has this project called the skywalk, which is for pedestrians to walk on. These are elevated walkways, mostly right outside railway stations, where you can walk freely without the danger of being hit by a car or bike almost all the way to the main road/highway. And yet you will find the skywalks empty and the public walking below, dodging cars, bikes, crossing busy roads and risking their lives.

If you don't know ergonomics, you are likely to think they lack the will and discipline to get home safely. But when you know better, you know that this is the outcome of poor design.

Firstly, people don't just walk home. They shop on the way, especially women. From daily vegetables, groceries, etc., all the chores are done between office and home. And all the shops are by the road. Secondly, there are no escalators to the skywalks, so you are not just making the daily walk back less efficient but also more tiring. And thirdly, if the skywalks are almost empty, it's dangerous because this is exactly where the molester will stand in wait for you.

You get design wrong when you don't account for the main thing. The main thing is that roads are built to move people, not just cars and bikes. Similarly, **the main thing a diet should do is to improve health; weight loss is secondary**. It's the car on the road. It can wait for its turn but allow the pedestrian to safely cross first. A diet that puts weight loss first will always cost you in terms of health. Like the skywalk, it will be an eye sore that didn't serve the purpose it was meant for.

## Handa Sir

Prof. Sunil Handa, who taught one of the most coveted courses on entrepreneurship at IIM-A, says that he always blesses his students with a small health problem when they are about to graduate. Nothing serious, but enough that it gets them to realign their priorities and bring their focus to what is important – their health. The valuation of the many businesses that he has mentored and nurtured is worth over ₹10 lakh crore. ‘Even hearing this makes me feel so happy, Sir. Doing this must have brought you so much happiness, I can’t even imagine. And I also cannot imagine the number of people who will turn up for your funeral when you die.’ I was saying this to him when we were taking a break from climbing a particularly steep slope on the Bara Banghal trek. ‘Ha, ha, ha,’ he laughed. ‘You, Rujuta, are not just my dietitian or like my daughter, you are my dadi.’ Best compliment I have ever received.

## Diet design

A design fit is the most important predictor of compliance and therefore of success. So, if long flights, meetings, late hours, whatever else, are an occupational hazard, you need a diet plan that accounts for it all. That lets the body take it all on and thrive, and still be in a mode to sleep tight at night

and get a twenty-thirty minutes workout squeezed in the morning. Life is not about looking like John Abraham, it's about looking like yourself. Because when we lose health, we actually do begin to look unlike ourselves.

So, how do you define a good diet design? One that you would use over and over again without getting tired of it. One that you want your children to adopt too. Because it is cost effective and improves the efficiency of your day-to-day life. It also accommodates for the holiday, the unexpected guests, the shaadi, or even tragedies. A successful diet, as we saw in the previous section, is something that you stay on till the end of time. Sustainability is at the core of its design.

And so, like every design, it must recognize the user and the problem, and then offer a suitable solution. Most importantly, the solution must not require the user to go out of her way to access it. Only then is it useful.

## A food plan you can depend on

The Indian thought believes that all that is in the *pind* (individual or inside) is in the *brahmanda* (world or, outside). If the *pancha tatvas* that make the world are space, air, fire, water and earth, then they are represented in the body as *vata* (space and air), *pitta* (fire and water) and *kapha* (earth). And it is food that aligns the body and keeps the inside and outside in sync. Or it is food that is the link between the pind and the brahmanda. Food is called *anna* in Sanskrit, the English translation of which is something you consume but can consume you in return.

The confusion, conflict with food is a representation of being consumed by food. Consuming food is an act of human pleasure, uncomplicated and complete. Here's a guide to re-introducing the pleasures of eating wholesome meals back into our lives.

Feel free to modify it based on your region, heritage and tastes. This plan is kid-friendly.

<p><b>On Waking Up</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- a banana or any fresh fruit</li> <li>- handful of soaked nuts and dry fruits</li> <li>- Overnight soaked raisins with 1-2 kesar strands (PMS)*</li> </ul> <p><i>A healthy start sets the tone for the day.</i></p> <p>* From our Ease PMS study</p>	<p><b>Breakfast</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Poha, upma, idli, dosa, paratha, egg and pav, etc.</li> <li>- Deep-fried vada, poori or kachori (once a week)</li> </ul> <p><i>Homemade nashta helps keep your blood sugars and moods steady through the day.</i></p>
<p><b>Mid-Morning</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Nimbu, kokum or amla sherbet.</li> <li>- Can also have coconut water or chaas here</li> <li>- Fresh fruit</li> <li>- A handful of nuts</li> </ul> <p><i>Lack of hydration leads to sugar cravings post lunch.</i></p> <p><i>Replace one chai or coffee at work with a hydrating drink or a fresh fruit.</i></p>	<p><b>Lunch</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Roti or rice + sabzi (or meat) + dal and ghee. Finish with a glass of chaas.</li> <li>- Can add* - achaar, chutney, dahi, salad or kachumber</li> </ul> <p>Keep main things to 3 or even 2.</p> <p>* Not counted in the 2-3 main items.</p>

<p><b>Evening Snack*</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Dry snacks like mathri, shankarpara, kurmura, chivda, chakli, khakra</li> <li>- Peanuts or chana or nuts</li> <li>- Seasonal specials like roasted shakarkandi or white corn</li> <li>- A sandwich, or roti-ghee-jaggery or a portion of your lunch</li> <li>- Chaat, once a week</li> </ul> <p><i>A wholesome meal here helps you feel at ease and reduces chances of overeating at dinner.</i></p> <p>* Plan for this meal a week in advance.</p>	<p><b>Dinner</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- khichdi or dal-rice,</li> <li>- roti-sabzi or bhakri-bhaaji (millets with sabzi)</li> <li>- phodni/tadka/vagharelo rice with an egg or paneer</li> </ul> <p>OR similar to lunch</p> <p><i>Easy to cook and digest, and light on the stomach.</i></p>
<p><b>At Bedtime</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- A cup of haldi milk*</li> <li>- Rice pej or rice kanji if you don't like milk</li> </ul> <p><i>If you eat dinner early but get hungry later</i></p> <p>*Can add -</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Nutmeg, if you have weak digestion.</li> <li>- Gulkand in summer</li> <li>- Cashews for good sleep</li> </ul>	<p><b>5 good food habits</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Don't start your day with tea/coffee.</li> <li>2. Avoid long gaps between meals.</li> <li>3. Stop eating just before you become full. (Practice – sit, silence, slow, senses.)</li> <li>4. Have ghee, fresh fruit and homemade chutney/pickle daily.</li> <li>5. Finish your dinner 3 hours before bedtime. (Bring bedtime early, don't push dinner late.)</li> </ol>

This is a framework that keeps you humane and in shape.

## Regular *ghar ka khaana* – A practical guide

From what we have learnt about food combinations, proportions and portions and using the framework of the 'Food plan', here is an easy guide for regular *ghar ka khaana*.

Food	Options/ variations	How to eat	When and how often to eat
Rice (single polished or hand pounded or red rice)	Rice, poha, kurmura	Steamed rice, khichdi, pulao, biryani, poha, idli, dosa, ghavan, bhakri, papad, kurmura roasted like chivda or moori	1–3 times a day. As main meals or even snack  Celeb versions like biryani or pulao, once a week
Whole wheat	Flour from the chakki, rava, daliya	Chapati, parantha, upma, daliya, thepla, halwa, khakra	1–3 times a day. As main meals or even snack  Celeb versions – halwa or poori – once a week
Millets	Whole, or flour	Roti or bhakri, khichdi, thalipeeth, dosa, poori, kheer or raab, laddoo, papad, chikki	1–3 times a day. As part of main meals or as snacks  Celeb versions – kheer, halwa or poori – once a week

## The Commonsense Diet

Food	Options/ variations	How to eat	When and how often to eat
Wheat and grains	Whole, or atta	Dry chutney, laddoo, papad, dals, curries, chillas, dosa, wadi, pithla	1–3 times a day. As main meals or even snack  Celeb versions like bhajji or dal pakwan – once a month
Legumes	Soaked and sprouted	Usal and curries, raitas, dry sabzi, dosa, kalan	1–3 times a day. As part of main meals or even snack
Vegetables	All kinds, including the hyper-local and wild varieties	Sabzi and curries, pickle, koshimbir (or kachumber)	1–3 times a day as part of main meals  *Avoid on their own, in the version of salad bowls and smoothies
Yams and tubers	The wide varieties of suran, arbi, ratalu, tapioca, konfal, karande	Sabzi, curry, khichdi, kees, wada, roasted, kaap – shallow fry on tava	1–3 times a week. Part of main meal or snack  Celeb versions like vada – once a month and undhiyo in season

<b>Food</b>	<b>Options/ variations</b>	<b>How to eat</b>	<b>When and how often to eat</b>
Fruits	The local and seasonal ones, including the wild varieties	Fresh fruit, sherbet, milkshake, sweet preparations. Some like melon turned into a sabzi	1–3 times a day on their own. Best not to mix fruits. But you can have a banana with your meal.  Celeb versions – aam ras in the mango season – daily or once a week. In-season fresh fruit like strawberry or sitaphal in milkshakes – daily or once a week
Nuts	Desi badam, walnut, pista, cashew	Eat them raw or as a garnish in sweet dishes or biryani/pulao, powdered and added to milk	1–2 times a day  Also include a handful of peanuts or chana as a snack
Seeds	Flaxseed, methi seeds, aliv seeds, til, etc.	Chutney, tadka, laddoo, chikki, mukhwaas	1–2 times a day for chikki, laddoo; chutney versions and tadka will be more often than that  Avoid the 'on its own' versions like seed shots

Food	Options/ variations	How to eat	When and how often to eat
Spices	Ginger, garlic, haldi, soonth, jeera, ajwain, pepper, hing, cinnamon, etc.	Tadka, chutney, achaar, garnish, etc.	Daily – spices are small part of all Indian wholesome meals  But avoid the 'on its own' versions like garlic pods or haldi shots
Dry fruit	Raisins, anjeer, dates, dry dates, jardalu or apricot	Eat them raw or as a garnish in sweet dishes or biryani/pulao, or add to milk	1–2 times a day  Sweet dishes once a week
Fats and oils	Groundnut, til, mustard, coconut (kacchi ghaani or cold-pressed or filtered)	For tadka, for deep and shallow frying, garnishing dry chutneys and in preparations like kichu	Daily use as necessary in cooking. And enjoy the fresh garnishes and chutneys, 1–2 times a day.
Dairy products	Milk, dahi, chaas, ghee, butter, paneer	Can be had by themselves or as an accompaniment. Also a part of tadka, garnish, raitas, kadhi	Can be had on their own – milk to start and end the day  Dahi and chaas as mid meals or as accompaniments to main meals, ghee or makhan as required with main meals

Food	Options/ variations	How to eat	When and how often to eat
			No problem if you would rather avoid dairy products, too.
Meat, fish, eggs	Curry, kebab, tava fry, part of biryani, pickles	As part of main meals but not on their own, except may be eggs	(Range varies from 3 times a day to 3 times a week, as per your culture)
			No problem if you would rather avoid them.
Sugar	Sugarcane, jaggery, laal shakkar, white sugar, kakvi	To bring mithas to all things	Can add to tea/ coffee/sherbets, as garnish on some sabzis or dals, and in homemade mithai Restrict to 3–6 tsp per day. Don't replace sugar with sweeteners

Please note that this list is not exhaustive but indicative. And many foods can be in more than one category, e.g. – peas are both a vegetable and a pulse. Til could be a seed or a source of fat. Have also added peanuts and chana, technically legumes, to nuts, for practical purposes. So, this is more like a practical checklist of sorts.

## Zone of control

My client has a successful business across the seven seas; there's nothing that he cannot do. And yet, when his eighty-year-old mom came to visit him in Singapore and got sick, there was nothing he could do except cool his heels in the hospital waiting room. 'I would trade everything for her to be ok,' he said to me on the phone. 'She's going to be fine Dinesh, you hang in there.'

A few procedures and a close call later, she was fine and all set for discharge. She's been a client of mine too. A robust woman who plays cards from 3 p.m. to 8 p.m. and has different groups – rummy, bridge, etc. 'Body will slow down but *dimaag daudna chahiye*,' she had said to me. Planning her diet was fun because all her friends would host each other by turn from Monday to Friday, and there was the speciality of every host served with the evening chai – muthiya, dhokla, poha, etc.

Upon her discharge, the first question she asked her doctor was '*Ghar kab jaa sakti hu* and can I eat one mithai every day?' The doctor said, 'You are so fit, you can take the evening flight itself to Mumbai and not one but two mithai every day.' She looked at Dinesh and said to the doctor, 'Please tell him.' The doctor addressed Dinesh, 'You heard me, right?' Dinesh nodded.

His mother out of his sight was the last thing he wanted. 'I have a lot to do in Mumbai,' Dinesh's mom had argued with him. 'What do you have to do?' Pay salaries to her staff of seven and make monthly contributions to the five groups

she played in. 'You can do that online,' Dinesh argued back.

'No, I can't,' said the mother. 'There's a lot that I do other than just pay money. But you think no one has any work other than you.' Then there's a driver's mom whom she had to take to her physician to check on her kidney stone, go with her friend to buy a necklace, and she had also committed to making muthiya for a relative's son. 'You will forget about me in two days and get busy with work, but people depend on me there.'

When people have a close call with death, there are only two things they wish for – shelter, to be back in the place they call home, and food, familiar and friendly/delicious food. These are two things that make us feel alive. And irrespective of how rich or poor we are, this is all we need. Also, we need to feel like we are needed, like we will be missed, and that tasks will be interrupted due to our absence. **Our comfort zone is our zone of control, where we are in charge of our home, food, and therefore life.**

## Tracking progress

When science is allowed to function like it is meant to – to help us make informed decisions and overcome our intrinsic biases – it works exactly like common sense. You could say that even about business acumen or war strategy or personal relationships, *common sense must be our guide*. We must know what to ignore and what to focus our energy on. Common sense is like magic because the truth is often hidden in plain sight and the focus is on the distraction.

It's a bit like solving crimes. A good detective looks for patterns and uses that to anticipate and hopefully prevent the next crime. A serial dieter has a pattern too – of eliminating all that they enjoy eating. Every time, there's murder of taste and texture in the hope of a new cure or weight loss. Once you identify this pattern, you can stop yourself from going on the next diet and killing time and muscle.

'All right, I agree to everything, but can I actually lose weight if I continue to eat normally?' The answer is yes, hell

yes. But slowly, steadily and sustainably. *Sustainable weight loss is 5–10 per cent of current weight per year.* If you commit to that, you can get there while living the full life you have planned for yourself. You can focus at work, have fun with family, the friendship of a community and a lot more, as you evolve into the real you. The one who realizes that the body is a vehicle with which to pursue and achieve all that one desires. And so, only losing weight is not going to be enough. I must also knock off inches on my waist, build more strength in my legs, be able to run for twenty minutes at a stretch, squat with at least my body weight and hold the Shirshasana for three minutes. The wish list is endless, and health is a moving goal post.

## Tracking progress

So, I am going to let you in on my trade secret. *When I work with clients, I don't weigh them.* I don't own a weighing scale. It is lazy to weigh clients. Instead, we put them through a full fitness assessment. You can download home fitness tests from anywhere on the internet. They are standardized and easy to self-administer. These tests also act as a very good indicator of your overall metabolic health – i.e., hormonal health, heart health, blood sugar regulation, etc. – and give a much better idea of your fitness than the number on the weighing scale.

You need to check the following:

- Resting heart rate (RHR) – ideally, first thing on rising
- Strength – typically, number of squats per minute

- Stamina – step test for 3 mins
- Stability – how long can you hold the plank pose
- Flexibility – sit and reach for your toes
- Waist – circumference at the narrowest part
- Hips – circumference at the broadest part (for the waist-to-hip ratio)

This is easy because you will get a number for each. It is tangible, and all that you do is *keep your eyes on the progress you make, not on the actual numbers*. So, let's say you started the sit-and-reach test with being 8 inches away from your toes. Three months later, if your fingers are only 6 inches away from the toes, it is good progress.

Good is not 'Oh, now I can reach my toes.' It is, 'I am getting there.' Because once you do reach your toes, you are going to want to reach beyond them. That's a natural human tendency, as natural as wanting to go from 1bhk to 3bhk. But in our zest for it, if we forget to celebrate that we have a roof over our heads, then it's a long-term problem that a 3bhk won't solve, nor will a 5bhk with a rooftop swimming pool. We must learn to have basic gratitude.

It is the same with the waist-to-hip ratio. For men, the waist should be under 40 inches, and for women, under 36 inches. And then, for men, when you divide waist to hip, the ratio should be 0.8 to 1 and for women between 0.7 and 0.85. But let's say you are a woman who started with a waist of 43. Even if you got to 41 in three months it is good; 36 may be a long way to go and 28 is where you would like to be at,

but if you don't celebrate the journey, 28 is not going to be a happy destination either.

The reason why 'I charge so much' is because we deliver more than just weight loss. People improve on their health and fitness first and the weight loss follows. This is the only way sustainability works. And no, it doesn't work the other way around. When you lose weight quickly, and when that is the primary focus, you also lose in terms of the number of squats you can do per minute, or your technique gets poorer as the strength from your legs is the first to go.

And the hips shrink but the waist stays or even increases, disturbing your waist-to-hip ratio, now actually putting you at a risk of developing metabolic diseases in the long run, even though you have lost weight. Your hamstrings get stiffer, so you may still reach your toes but the journey gets tougher. The core gets weaker over time, joints hurt, sleep goes, appetite fluctuates, moods swing. Not worth it at all.

### **Google and the role of healthy skepticism**

Dr Sai Satish of Apollo Chennai, tells his team to not mock people for going on Google. 'They are sick and scared. If they are not irritating you, then you are doing something wrong. And if we are such a good team, we must be able to defend our line of treatment and explain it in a manner that is understood by the patient.' 'Skepticism must be encouraged', he says. 'You make less errors that way.'

He also encourages the people he treats to seek a second opinion. Clarity only comes out of confusion.

And my two cents here are: don't check your cardio's prescription with your dermat and vice versa. Get an expert in the same field to weigh in.

## More data points

So, when you have to decide how good the diet plan you are on is, you must build more than one data point. Not just weight but strength, stamina, flexibility, stability, RHR, waist-to-hip ratio, etc. Measure them, track them – or every three months.

Along with that we should also track things we can't really count but can give a rating to – sleep, acidity, bloating and constipation, exercise compliance, period regularity, aches and pains, mood swings and sugar cravings. And thirdly, if you have any metabolic condition, track that too with blood tests, as prescribed by your doctor. So track your HbA1c, liver enzymes, lipid profile, TSH – whatever may be relevant in your case. And then take a wholesome view on how you are treating your body.

One of the things that I always tell my clients (one more trade secret) is that **your approach towards health and wealth should be mirror images of each other**. When it comes to wealth generation, work, etc., go hard at yourself. Push all

boundaries, stay up all night, slog all day, think of nothing but the task at hand and go all mad about it.

But when it comes to health generation, weight loss and fitness, go easy. Respect the body and its limitations, get good sleep, skip the workout today if you haven't recovered from yesterday's, don't think about calories, weight, steps, all day. Stay sane. It's the only way to stay sensible and sustainable.

This I have to tell my clients because most of them are super achievers who wonder *ke agar duniya pe kaabu kar liya toh shareer pe kyu nahi*. They are almost embarrassed that they have had to sign up because how difficult can weight loss be? It is not, but you are on the wrong track. If you push too hard, your body will snap. And you don't want that. Remember the definition of health at the start of the book? The state where you forget about your body. The mother, the nap, the train, no flies on the face and, most importantly, safety of the baby. If we can get meditative with our bodies, then really, why not?

### *Ayu - vayu - payu*

One of my clients, Ajay Lakhanpal, gifted me a copy of the principal Upanishads. The book gives the English translation of the Sanskrit text, word by word and then the full verse. I read two shlokas daily, that's my morning ritual. It doesn't have anyone's version of what the shlokas mean, it is simply telling us what the OG authors wrote. I love it. Every time it's like discovering a new reality. One of the shlokas has

this equation – the more often you use your *payu* or feet, the stronger your *saman vayu* or digestive powers, and the longer your *ayu* or length of life. So the idea of daily steps is quite ancient, but unlike in the modern world, it's not prescriptive – 10k a day or whatever. It's a lot more commonsensical.

Staying active makes you feel alive, improves your digestion and helps you feel light on your feet. You need to be on a food plan which, by default, helps you get more active and makes you feel like walking instead of taking a rick. Where you spring up on your feet to answer the doorbell instead of calling out to your house help.

So, even with tracking progress, don't track every single thing every single month. But list out about three outcomes max that you would want to stay on track with. So, if cravings are an issue, list the number of times you ordered food last-minute. If poor sleep is an issue, list the number of times you wake up in the night. If your stomach is an issue, list the number of times you needed a fibre supplement. And then, along with that, measure your waist and hip.

Do this every month and self-administer the fitness tests, or at least two of them, every three months. That way, whatever your goal is – whether it's improving your HbA1c, body weight, triglycerides, uric acid – it will be met in a sustainable manner. And how often should you weigh yourself? Once every three months. That much is more than enough to check on trends. Vigilance and not anxiety.

## Guide to tracking progress

	Data points	How to track	How often
1. Things that can be measured	Resting heart rate Waist-to-hip ratio Weight Strength Stamina Flexibility Stability	Standard fitness tests, Tape measurements, etc.	Once in 3 months
2. Things that can be tracked but not measured	Sleep quality Acidity, bloating and constipation Sugar cravings Mood swings Exercise compliance Aches and pains Period regularity	Keep notes	Monthly
3. Metabolic conditions	HbA1c TSH BP Liver enzymes Lipid profile etc.	Lab tests	Only when relevant and as prescribed by your doctor

It's important to remember that all the health outcomes associated with weight loss will come your way only with improved body composition. Without improved waist-to-hip ratio, strength in the lower limbs, stability in the core, flexibility in the posterior chain, the risk of non-communicable diseases (NCDs), or for that matter even response to infectious diseases, will not change.

And when these improve, the risk drops significantly, even if body weight hasn't dropped yet. Health is a journey, not a destination. Focus on the trend, not the arrival. This is also the reason why train journeys are always more powerful and romantic than air travel. They allow you to enjoy the progress, take in the taste and fragrance of Vapi, Ratlam and Panipat before arriving at Amritsar.

### Pharmaceutical or nutraceutical?

I went to vote on 23 November for the Maharashtra assembly elections. As I entered the polling area, I noticed one of the polling officers pouring tons of capsules from a fish oil bottle.

'Kaay Sir,' I asked, '*divsachya kitii?*' How many per day?  
'Ten', he replied, 'twice a day.'

'Diabetes,' both of us said together and nodded, and I went ahead to show my Aadhaar card and cast my vote.

Does the pharma lobby exist? Yes. Are they here to make a profit? Yes. But they have a product that works. Administered the right way, with due diligence and care towards eating right, exercising and making lifestyle changes, you could potentially keep many problems away. Taking a pill and taking care of one's lifestyle are not mutually exclusive. They are both interventions for a good and healthy life.

So, stick it out with the basics. And track your parameters – what's happening to the waist-to-hip ratio, digestion, moods, etc. – and you will notice that your body is now regulating HbA1c better. Over time, you will notice that you need a smaller dose to stay within a good range, and are hopefully able to come off the drug too. If not, your worst case is that you are at the same dose for the next ten or fifteen years, enabled by your diverse diet and consistent exercise. And your heart, kidney, nerves, eyes, etc., are in a good shape too because of the healthy routine you have built.

Not taking the diabetes pill but taking a ton of nutraceuticals, twenty to thirty pills, is not going to keep pharma profits down. They make the supplements too and you are just keeping another vertical of theirs cash-rich.

# 9

## Diet recalls and modifications

### Getting to know you

'Ma'am, I am a diabetic', or 'I am 5'4" and 86 kgs' – that's not an introduction according to me. It tells me nothing about you. And, more importantly, it tells me nothing about what I should do with your diet. What should I change? What should remain the same? What needs to be brought back? What needs to be removed?

When people sign up with me, I always ask them to write their expected program outcomes. Their top three, in no order of priority. My work involves designing or planning a diet to meet those outcomes and set timelines for the same. We call it the 'Getting to Know You' sheet. People hate writing it because it also means documenting their health history, telling us when they were at their fittest, how the lockdown affected them, how their sleep and exercise are, etc.

Surprisingly, almost no one writes that they want to lose weight as one of their top three expected outcomes. It is amazing that once people have had the time to think and reflect on why they are making an investment of time and resources into getting healthier, they want different things from losing weight. They want to feel more energetic, sleep better, prepare better for ageing, climb Patalsu or Kilimanjaro without being overtly tired, and more.

The fact is that we are all here for a limited time. When we understand this, we rationalize the amount of time and bandwidth we are willing to spend on chasing numbers. A sustainable diet is the one that allows us to take our focus off the weight chart and blood report but never let them forget that we are watching, just like the mother with her kid at Haridwar station.

## **Case studies**

Here are a few real-life diet recalls. Typically, we ask our clients to write down the details of their entire day in real time and send us this recall for three days. We have shortlisted diverse profiles; descriptions have been changed out of respect for privacy, everything else has been told exactly like it happened (my ode to “Fargo”). If you think it is looking exactly like your recall, that’s because so many of us make the exact same mistakes with food. Alongside them are our recommendations to show how even very small modifications

to one's diet, exercise and lifestyle can lead to steady and sustainable improvements.

In fact, my clients often wonder 'but mostly I was eating like this only earlier,' when they see improvements in their health. So, other than adding this here and removing that from there, I have done nothing much. Building a sustainable diet means not needing you to do a dance and drama every time you want to use it. Small changes that don't take away from your way of life are the most powerful because of the compounding effect they offer.

### Compounding

A fund manager client of mine was once in her doctor's waiting room. She asked the compounder what she does for her investments. 'Nothing, there's nothing left at the end of the month,' she said. 'Are there ₹500 left at the end of every month?' ₹600,' replied the compounder. 'Ok, give it to me', said my client. ₹600 every month and three years later, she had built a portfolio of close to a lakh. 'How do I have so much money?' asked the compounder. '*Nanu nanu, motu thai che*', my client replied. Small things turn big over time.

We are able to suggest these small changes only because we get to really know our clients over time. Thirty minutes one-on-one, week after week. Seeing them through their menstrual

phases, launching IPOs, going through mergers, marriages and more, allows us a unique insight into the small things that will make the tide smoother. Honestly, people making quick recommendations as to what you must do or making big changes by just watching viral reels is silly and wasteful to say the least.

I am hoping that these examples will guide you with regard to the kind of small changes you can make in your own diet and lifestyle to enjoy huge gains in your health portfolio in the long run.

**Who:** A vibrant Marwari homemaker in her fifties trying to navigate her menopause and falling prey to an array of misleading diet advice in the process. She has spent the last 30 years on diets and tried every latest weight loss aid (including Ozempic). As her BP began to fluctuate, palpitations and anxiety attacks became frequent and the list of pills piled up, we were, as I've heard many of our clients say, her last resort.

**Ailments:** Frequent stomach upsets and infections, hot flashes, a sudden increase in weight, depression for five years, knee pain, fluctuating BP

**Goals:** feel better, sleep better, not wake up sweating

<b>Day 1</b>	<b>Day 2</b>	<b>Day 3</b>
10.45 a.m. – Small elaichi banana	8.30 a.m. – Banana	9.30 a.m. – 1 sourdough toast and tea
11.30 a.m. – Plant protein (1 scoop) with chaas, papaya and mosambi, tea	9.30 a.m. – 1 sourdough bread toast and tea	12 p.m. – Plant protein (1 scoop) chaas, papaya (small bowl) and 1 mosambi
2.15 p.m. Lunch – apple cider in water, salad (1 bowl) with moong sprouts, arugula, red and green cabbage, and paneer grilled sandwich with capsicum, onion and cilantro, (2 slices of bread) + 1/4th cup of tea with just a teaspoon of milk and no sugar	12 p.m. – Plant protein (1 scoop) with chaas and fruits	2 p.m. – Salad (1 bowl), 2 laal masoor dal chilla with dahi
5 p.m. – Cold coffee with Splenda and a dash of oat milk	2.30 p.m. – Salad, chawli, dahi and 1 sourdough toast	3 p.m. – Cold coffee with Splenda and a dash of oat milk
6.30 p.m. – Bitter gourd juice with amla and amba haldi, 4 almonds and 4 walnuts	4.30 p.m. – Cold coffee with Splenda and a dash of oat milk	5.45 p.m. – Tea and chana kurmura
8.30 p.m. Dinner – 1 carrot, 1 cucumber, missal with 1 pav	6 p.m. – Karela, amla, haldi juice and 4 almonds, 1 walnut	9.30 p.m. – 1 big bowl of salad and vatana and kulcha

**Observations:** She tries to include every influencers' secret recipe to weight loss, from anti-inflammatory diets to green juices, and every new product that is on the market. There is fear of sugar, of carbs – of a full meal, basically. Some local, traditional food items are included too, but without the time-tested combinations, and only out of greed for their goodness. The desperate bids have led to a weak gut, poor sleep and a tougher transition to menopause.

**Recommendations**

- 1 Add rice-based meals (dal rice/pulao/kadhi rice) at dinner 2 days a week to allow digestion to get better
- 2 Replace Splenda with regular white sugar in coffee, and oat milk with regular milk
- 3 Remove vegetable juices/methi pani/amlas shots, etc. from 4–6 p.m. and, instead, have a wholesome meal  
Avoid eating large quantities of salad; eat it as a small part of the main meal and don't use it to curb appetite
- 5 Regulate lunch time to 2 p.m. max, and dinners to 8 p.m. and keep them basic

**Progress** In 6 months:

- 1 The waist size dropped 4 inches, the navel dropped 2 inches
- 2 Her moods got better, she was able to taper down the dose of her anti-depressant and her doctor was only happy to help
- 3 Her knee pain became a thing of the past and she began doing body weighted full squats during her exercise sessions
- 4 Intensity and frequency of night sweats dropped, allowing her unbroken sleep for 4–5 hours at a stretch

## #2

**Who:** A young, driven doctor in his mid-thirties, practising in the US. Night shifts, day shifts were his routine life. An overachiever, he has been a hardworking boy since childhood and believes weight loss is about will power, discipline and behavioural shifts. He blamed his erratic schedule and felt that with time it was getting harder for him to drop the weight no matter how hard he pushed.

**Ailments:** Depression, anxiety, IBS

**Goals:** Reduce body fat, increase lean muscle mass, feel more energetic

Day 1	Day 2	Day 3
2:30 a.m. – 1 black coffee and 1 cup chole	1:00 a.m. – drank whey protein shake	2:00 a.m – had snack box: some grapes, peanuts, cheese
6:00 a.m. – 1 CLIFF bar, 1 protein bar (perfect bar)	1:30 a.m. – drank 1 cup of black coffee	9:00 a.m – 5 methi thepla, 1 cup desi yogurt and 1 cup palak paneer
Slept from 8 a.m.–3 p.m.	7:00 a.m. Left from work	9:30 a.m – sleep
4:00 p.m. – 1 vegetable burrito, chips, salsa, cheese stick, 1 Sabra hummus cup	7:30 a.m. – ate couple of chocolate cubes	1:30 p.m. – woke up
	8:00 a.m. – ran 10k	2:30 p.m. – 1.5 bajra rotla, 2 cup sev tameta nu shak
	11:00 a.m. – drank 1 cup of Indian tea, ate 2 cups of chorinu shak with one cup of yogurt, 1 pack Maggi	4:30 p.m. 1 cup Indian tea

1:00 a.m. – 1 cup chole, 1 protein bar (perfect bar)	Slept from 11:30 a.m. – 4 p.m., woke up 2–3 times for using restroom	7:00 p.m. – black coffee
2:00 a.m. – ½ bag Chex Mix	4:15 p.m. – drank one cup of Indian tea	8:00 p.m. – 1 bottle whey protein
3:00 a.m. – 1 cup chole	5:00 p.m. – went to work	9:00 p.m. – a 45-minute treadmill run
	11:00 p.m. – came back from work	9:50 p.m. – 10-minute strength training
	11:30 p.m. – ate 2 cups of chori nu shak with one cup of yogurt, 1 packet of Chex Mex.	10:20 p.m. – 2 cup baingan bharta, 1 bajra rotlo, 1 whey protein bottle
	12:00 a.m. – napped	11:00 p.m. – went for night shift for work

**Observations:** Whether it was a day shift or a night shift, he ate no more than two wholesome meals in the entire day in order to keep his diet low-cal. The rest was a barrage of tea/coffee/ready-to-eat protein bars/protein shakes. And when it was an emotionally draining day, the cheetos/maggie/chex-mex would come out, making it a bad boy–good boy routine; days which were ‘good’ where he barely ate led to days which were very bad with binge eating episodes.

## The Commonsense Diet

### Recommendations

Add grains like rice with chole/pita with hummus for more balanced meals and to avoid erratic hunger during the day

- 2 Remove all the packaged versions – protein shakes/bars/Maggi/Chez Mex/Cheetos, etc., from home pantry
- 3 Replace protein bars and stock up peanuts/chikki/yogurt/chana, etc., for in-between meals
- 4 Avoid more than 1 black coffee during the night shift and include a more hydrating drink like nimbu sherbet or buttermilk or a fresh fruit
- 5 Regulate the number of take-outs in a week to 2–3 times (50 % of his current number) and get food from a local aunty instead

### Progress In 3 months:

- 1 Lost 2 inches at his navel and dropped a size overall
- 2 Didn't feel as exhausted post his exercise, his compliance with his running got better and his calf pain had disappeared
- 3 Eventually, he rediscovered his love for food and even employed a cook to come twice a week so he could rely much less on packaged foods and have more access to *ghar ka khaana*.

## #3

**Who:** An ambitious 27-year-old event planner who was worried sick that the tastings and entertaining – a routine part of her work – was going to make her fat and old very quickly. She was also harrowed by constantly having to coordinate with multiple agencies at her work.

**Ailments:** None. But there were mood swings, having just gone through a bad breakup.

**Goals:** Get rid of cravings, fat loss, better mood and mental health, especially while dealing with unrealistic expectations of clients

Day 1	Day 2	Day 3
Wake up 8 a.m.	Wake up 8 a.m.	Wake up 8 a.m.
8:15 a.m. – Black coffee	8:15 a.m. – Black coffee	8:15 a.m. – Black coffee
12 noon – Black coffee		
1:30 p.m. Lunch – 2 Edamame truffle dumplings	Got to office by 10:30 and was there all day	Got to office by 10:30 a.m. and was there all day
1 Crystal dumpling	12 noon – Black coffee	12 noon – Black coffee
2 Chilean sea bass mooli roll – no carb		
1 Prawn wrapped in spinach – no carb	1:30 p.m. – Leftover khao suey from previous night	1:00 p.m. – $\frac{1}{2}$ Paneer bhurji roll with salad (lettuce and cucumber with mustard olive oil dressing)
2 pieces of crispy prawn cheung fun	3:30 p.m. – Handful of makahana	
2 spoons of egg fried rice		
1 piece tenderloin		
3–4 French beans		

4:00 p.m. – a few pieces of toast with caviar/cheese and bowl of boiled corn Went home after lunch and worked all evening	7:30 p.m. – 1 paneer bhurji roll 9:30 p.m. – 2 bowls of daal, 1 pomfret fillet, 1 rice bhakri, 1 bowl of salad, 2 glasses of wine Got home Slept by 11.30 p.m.	4:20 p.m. – Lunch – $\frac{1}{2}$ paneer bhurji roll with salad (lettuce and cucumber with mustard olive oil dressing) and two bites of dessert tasting 5:20 p.m. – a handful of makhana 6:15 p.m. – Went for a dessert tasting, five bites of dessert during tasting 7:15 p.m. – Came home, had one bowl of rice with prawn curry 8:30 p.m. – Had dinner – 1 almond flour pizza with sausages, cheese, onion, jalapeno, mushroom, peppers and 1 bowl of salad 2 glasses of red wine Ended up stalking my ex, sorry! Needed a bowl of ice-cream after. Slept by 1 a.m.
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**Observations:** If you look closely, you see her keeping herself hungry for the first half of the day. As the day progresses, she tries to eat 'low carb' or 'no carb' and finally ends the day with pasta, pizza and wine, feeling guilty and disappointed (only to repeat the same cycle the next day). She is also keeping a 16-hour fasting window, so the first meal is often 3–4 hours after reaching office, making it difficult for her to not shout at everyone who crosses her path and needing two large coffees to make it till 2 p.m. Sometimes, she wonders if she has turned into a permanent bridezilla herself.

### Recommendations

- 1 Add a breakfast of parantha or eggs and toast before leaving home/on reaching office
- 2 Replace late night snacks with a haldi milk
- 3 Remove ice-cream, chips and other UPFs – limit them to 1 serving a week, max
- 4 Avoid having leftover dinner for the next day's breakfast and lunch, especially if it is from outside
- 5 Regulate the wine to maximum once a week and eat dinner before you drink

### Progress In 3 months:

- 1 Waist and navel measurements dropped by 2 inches each
- 2 Lower body strength improved from 13 squats to 20 squats in a minute, giving her butt a round and toned look. The plank went from 20 seconds to a full 50 seconds, almost pushing a minute

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- 3 Cravings disappeared and so did the bloating
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- 4 She stopped stalking her ex and began to enjoy her work a lot more
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## #4

**Who:** Delhi-based lawyer in his early sixties. Reluctantly gave into his daughter's wish for him to be on the program. With her wedding around the corner, she thought it was time she got her father the guidance he needed. She described him as a 'highly functioning alcoholic'.

**Ailments:** Pre-diabetic, BP, but not started on the drug yet

**Goals:** Stamina for daughter's wedding, client meetings abroad  
Ladakh bike trip with the boys

Day 1	Day 2	Day 3
5.15 a.m. - woke up	5.30 a.m. - woke up	6 a.m. - woke up
5.20 a.m. - big mug of masala chai	5.40 a.m. - big mug of masala chai	6.30 a.m. - big mug of masala chai
5.30 a.m. - sat down to work at home office	5.45 a.m. - sat down to work at home office	6.45 a.m. - no workout as long day
6.45 a.m. - freshened up and got ready for workout	6.30 a.m. - freshened up and got ready for workout	8 a.m. - slice of brown bread with cheese
7.30-8.30 a.m. - PT at home, back exercises	7.30-8.20 a.m. - yoga at home	10 a.m. - got ready to go for recce for daughter's wedding venue
8.35 a.m. - salt lime water	8.20 - salt lime water	

8.40 a.m. – got ready for work	8.25 a.m. – got ready for work	3 p.m. – chicken kebab, butter chicken, black dal, roti, falooda, at friend's restaurant
9.10 a.m. – left for work in my car (driver driven)	8.40 a.m. – left for work in my car (driver driven)	5.30 p.m. – left in the car (driver) for shopping
9.45 a.m. – in the office (standing desk, moving around as much as possible)	9.15 a.m. – in the office 10.40 a.m. – black coffee	7.30 p.m. – back home, freshening up
10.45 a.m. – black coffee	1 p.m. – quinoa salad bowl	8 p.m. – 3 small whiskey
1.30 p.m. – grilled fish with fresh salad and a diet coke	4.30 p.m. – 4 chicken nuggets with coke zero	9.30 p.m. – keto pizza
5 p.m. – 2 chicken nuggets with black coffee	7 p.m. – back home	10 p.m. – off to bed, asleep in about 15 minutes.
6.30 p.m. – 2 small whiskey, mixed nuts, entertaining clients	8.45 p.m. – 3 small whiskey (family get together at home)	12,424 steps per fitbit
8 p.m. – back home	9.45 p.m. – 3 slices of hand tossed pizza, little dal makhani and paneer matar	
9 p.m. – chilli chicken and palak mushroom, small bowl of gajar halwa	11.20 p.m. off to bed	
9.45 p.m. – retire to bed and fall asleep in some time (about 15 minutes)	7,806 steps per fitbit	
8,825 steps per fitbit		

**Observation:** In a bid to regulate his sugars and get more benefit from his workouts, he had replaced all his meals with protein. But without the addition of carbs, his body lost out on the ‘protein sparing effect’ and failed to build adequate strength and muscle. The drinking was frequent, both socially and at work during client meetings. He was also resistant to adding wholesome meals because of time constraints and diets that had ‘worked like magic’ in the past.

### Recommendations

- 1 Add a banana pre-workout
- 2 Replace salad and grilled fish lunch with roti, sabzi and dahi
- 3 Remove colas and have shikanji (nimbu sherbet), or amla sherbet
- 4 Avoid keto pizza and just eat regular pizza once a week – 2 slices
- 5 Regulate drinks to 2 a week and only with clients, not friends

### Progress In 6 months:

- 1 16 squats in a minute to 24 full range deep squats  
21 incline pushups to 7 full pushups  
1.19-minute plank to 2.05-minute plank hold
- 2 Stamina on bike rides went up and avoiding drinks on flights helped reduce jet lags and fatigue
- 3 He dropped 3 inches on his waist, 2 inches on his navel and the hip remained the same, making for a better waist to hip ratio.

## #5

**Who:** 30-year-old software professional with long working hours who had recently moved outside the country. A year ago, she did an Ayurvedic diet to balance the hormones and get smooth, pain-free periods. But it wasn't a fit to her lifestyle and left her exhausted with debilitating cramps. The doctors scared her that she may have endometriosis, and her confidence dropped lower than ever.

**Ailments:** Painful cramps and heavy bleeding during periods

**Goals:** Smooth and pain-free periods – 'Only 1 goal I have. I cannot go on with this pain for 30 more years.'

Weekday	Weekend
7.30 a.m. – wake up and have moringa powder in water	7:30 a.m. – wake up and drink cinnamon and methi seed water
9 a.m. – tea with almond milk (regular milk is not allowed) and Marie biscuit	8:10 a.m. – 1 cup tea + 1 marie biscuit
11 a.m. – pomegranate with soaked chia seeds	9:10 a.m. – muskmelon shake in oat milk with chia seeds
2 p.m. – Barley water before the meal lauki with minimal masala, rice, moong dal	12:00 p.m. – bathed
5 a.m. – Nimbu paani with ginger juice and turmeric paste with jaggery, elaichi powder and a pinch of salt added	1:30 p.m. – went out for stroll along the beach
6 p.m. – Methi pulao	1:45 p.m. – 1 apple
	2 p.m. – made lunch
	2:15 p.m. – half vanilla cupcake while cooking
	2:30 p.m. – 2 katori sambhar, 1.5 katori rice, 3 tbsp rajma curry

9.30 p.m. - choco-strawberry vegan and sugar free ice cream  Slept by 10 p.m.	3 p.m. - took out clothes from washing machine and hung them on the cloth stand  4-6:15 p.m. - nap on daybed  6:15 p.m. - 1 pc Kaju katli  7 p.m. - avocado toast  7:20 p.m. - made Nutella toast (craving for sweet)  7:25 p.m. - ate Nutella toast  8:00 p.m. - pending office work  8:30 p.m. - 2 whisky sour, vegan burger and french fries (craving salty and fried and tasty food)  11 p.m. - 1 chocolate espresso vegan and sugar free ice cream  Slept at 1 a.m.
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**Observations:** Her ayurvedic diet allowed only moong and no other pulses, not even tur, plus lauki in every meal, different shots during the day and limited fruit intake, only pomegranate. An integrative medicine person asked her to go vegan, shift to mock meat, drink smoothies and eat fresh salads instead of grains. The conflicting views had left her more confused than ever, so her recall had a bit of both, plus a few odd things she picked from social media. Her weekdays left her exhausted, and her weekends didn't allow her to recover either.

**Recommendations**

- 1 Add regular ghar ka khaana like poha/upma/paratha, etc., for breakfast; dal rice/roti sabzi + jaggery and ghee for lunch and dinners. (She would cook in two batches per week.)
- 2 Replace the evening drink with a wholesome snack like rajgira laddoo or a ragi porridge between 4–5 p.m. to avoid cravings later
- 3 Remove all seeds/powders/kadhas/milk alternatives like oat or almond milk/mock meats and meat alternatives
- 4 Avoid 'healthy desserts' and instead have a fully loaded dessert of your choice once a week
- 5 Regulate nap time to 20–30 minutes between 1–3 p.m.

**Progress In 3 months:**

- 1 Sugar cravings came down to zero and constipation became nil  
Pain during periods came down and number of pain killers she needed went from four to zero
- 3 Had the energy to cook, clean and exercise; reduced hunger pangs and guilt
- 4 She began to feel normal and not 'dirty' during periods

## #6

**Who:** A small-town techie in his forties, who now leads a unicorn

**Ailments:** None. But sometimes has stomach pain, disappears on clearing bowels

**Goals:** Gain weight, better energy and improved gut health

### Recalls

5:30 a.m. – woke up	5:30 a.m. – woke up, woke up once at night	Could not clear stomach well last night
6:30 a.m. – athletic greens	6:30 a.m. – red poha, sev	6:30 a.m. – woke up
7–7:50 a.m. – Yoga + weights+ pushups	9:00 a.m. – fruits, uttapam, sambhar	7:00 a.m. – athletic greens
8 a.m. – protein shake (plant-based)	Flight to Bombay	7:30 a.m. – dosa, idli, coffee outside
9 a.m. – soaked dry fruits (7 almonds, 5–6 cranberries, pumpkin, sunflower and chia seeds) + idli sambhar (2)	10:30 a.m. – landed in Bombay, B2B meetings and travel.	10:00 a.m. – walk around 2 kilometres
9 a.m. to 8 p.m. – B2B meetings in office	12:30 p.m. – mushroom soup, Pad Thai, sauted veggies	12:30 p.m. – sushi, avacodo toast
12 p.m. – fruits (papaya)	Lunch meeting	4 p.m. – fruits (banana and grapes)
12:30 p.m. – lunch – brown rice, dal, gobi, peanut chutney	3 p.m. – green tea	6:30 p.m. – veg clear soup
2 p.m. – buttermilk	5 p.m. – sprouted moong chaat	
4 p.m. – fruits (guava and orange)	8 p.m. – dinner meeting:	

7 p.m. – sambhar rice, sauted veggies, 2 eggs (only whites)	beetroot, sweet potato, quinoa Checked into a hotel, crashed	7 p.m. – khichdi, moong halwa 8:30 p.m. – reading, in bed, meditation
9 p.m. – read and meditate 10 p.m. – sleep	10 p.m. – sleep	9:30 p.m. – sleep

**Observations:** Eats ‘fancy’ but is not interested in food. Wants to exercise but says he cannot find time. He says his heart wants masala chai but he is living the cold brew dude kind of life. Wants a kachori for breakfast but has settled for athletic greens instead. Craves for chaat and samosa but VC said have sweet potato air fried chips. Only takes food advice from VCs and stops eating eggs when his parents visit.

#### Recommendations

- 1 Replace athletic greens with a banana or raisins or figs on rising
- 2 Add paratha and sabzi as a breakfast option
- 3 Remove brown rice, quinoa and have regular rice and dal, roti sabzi and millets of the season
- 4 Avoid seeds and instead have chutneys
- 5 Regulate bedtime and cut back on screen time

#### Progress In 3 months:

- 1 Improved musculature and lesser aches and pains. Shirts fitted better and he looked less like a lost boy and more like the genius he was (his words)
- 2 17 reps of regular squats went up to 25 in a minute

- 3      34 seconds plank went up to 1 minute 14 seconds
- 4      Gas in the second half of the day settled completely and constipation improved
- 5      Bowel movement became smoother, and the time taken in the washroom dropped to 5–10 mins from 30–45mins

## In Conclusion

### A full life

If there is a single sentence that sums up this book it is this – food is the language of life and of love. All my years of work have taught me that PPP is greater than PPP. Pyaar, parivaar and parvarish is infinitely bigger than paisa, position and power. My clients, who come from loving relationships, where families are bonded with affection and where they are raised to have self-esteem, manners and gratitude, do really well with their health. They come from homes where kitchens are still central, where food is still a way to show care, where looking out for each other is default, a way of life.

And money, power, position have nothing to do with this. It is all about love and acceptance, support and acknowledgment, whether the waist is 50 or it is 28. My client's 25-year-old daughter was working with me. When she lost 3 inches in one month, she treated the entire family to pav bhaji and ice cream. She was back from the USA, where she had gained a ton of weight, but no one was waiting for all the weight to come down, they were celebrating progress.

On the other hand, when people have paisa, position and power but lack the other PPP, they lose the same or even more weight or inches, but it doesn't touch them. They don't come from families or environments that have *pehchan* or recognition of their progress. So, they still make progress, but the process is harder on them and on us. Access to people who are invested in our well-being without an agenda, purely out of love, is one of the least celebrated blessings.

## The power of pyaar

I worked with Tanya, a smart, savvy, rare woman in her forties who operated out of Singapore and headed the Asia Pacific-Australia region for her company. Rare, because she is one of the only women I know whose mother had preserved her school sports medals. She wasn't an athlete, she never made it to district or state or anything, these were just school medals hung on the wall behind her desk from where she took her calls. Again, a rare sight. Post-pandemic, as my work shifted more online, I saw everything hung on walls, people started having dedicated spaces for calls with good light and some show-off material behind. A golf shot picture, a pic from EBC, a certificate of having completed an executive course from Harvard, etc.

I thought I had seen it all, and then I saw these old medals. She grew up in Mumbai and I recognized the school medals instantly. I think everyone had the same vendor, but I asked to double check. 'Oh! My mom has saved them for all of us

three girls. She says it's a reminder that I raised you to work and play.' Wow! *Maaji, charan sparsh.*

I believe, and have seen through my experience, that girls who are celebrated at home, find a way back to nurturing themselves with good food sooner or later. The same was happening with Tanya. She had switched countries, roles, been on the motherhood journey, and with that, through many diets and excessive workouts. At 40-ish, she hit the 'no more bullshit of yo-yo body weight, no more second-guessing every morsel I eat, no more chocolates every night' mode, and that's how I came into the picture.

First things first: we got her to eat but more importantly, she ate without resistance. Women who have received pyaar at home are not resistant to good counsel or to good food. Soon enough, she had the fuel to recover from exercise, push herself harder at work and not snap at her 10-year-old daughter. Within a few months, we were working with her daughter too, a full-time gymnast with the unique distinction of having taught her mom how to do the cartwheel.

## Pursuit of purpose

Alright, truth be told, the only bio hack you need is respect for evolution. Ultimately, you and I must vacate our place for those who will come after us and live as gently as possible while we are at it. Evolution is a process that takes the best from us and passes it forward. The best version of us will come only if the current version will make room for it. So honestly, I am not excited about longevity. I find it quite pointless.

Reading glasses will come, if not at 40, then at 50. Walking speed will slow down, if not at 70, then at 80. Deterioration is *pakka*, just like death.

The whole point of looking after the body is to lead a life of joy and purpose. It doesn't protect you from getting sick or dying, but it makes the process easier, or at least more organic. Or, to put it in a different manner, it reduces collateral damage. Let's say (and I sincerely hope this never happens even to my *dushmans*) that you get sick with some condition for which there is no cure or is progressive in nature.

If you are overall fit, not chiselled but eating correctly, exercising regularly, sleeping on time, etc., then your health outcomes are better. You are an easier case not just for the doctor to handle but also for your caregivers. That way, your sickness is only limited to taking a toll on your body, it doesn't damage your family's mental health or at least reduces the toll it takes on them. Less medicines to pop, fewer hospital visits, fewer draining nights, etc.

And if you are blessed with a curable condition, then again it makes it easier on everyone because there are no other complications involved. Harish bhai, the living encyclopaedia on the Himalaya, has been a regular at Iyengar yoga for a few decades and trekking and climbing for over 50–60 years. He has a paunch, but a straight spine and strength in his legs. In his seventies, he went through a hip replacement. Within weeks, he was back to yoga class, and in a few months had returned to trekking.

Good health softens the blow of disease and age, and allows us to pursue our purpose with vigour and strength.

Maturity is knowing that this is all that you want out of your life. And that it doesn't come dressed in six-packs or toned arms.

So I am going to say this: if eating a certain way is commonsensical, don't look towards scientific evidence for approval. Just eat it. Science will catch up, and within your lifetime. Or else we lose a generation to eating sukha roti and avoiding ghee, or eating idli and avoiding coconut chutney. And then through bro-podcasts we rediscover what women have always known: that allowing ourselves the taste, texture, tradition of wholesome food is not just healthy but in tune with the latest in science.

### A full life

A full life is not one where you wear the same size of jeans for over twenty years, but the one where you progress with your career, family and other adventures without running out of fuel. Dharma, artha, kama, moksha are important pillars of life. To put it simply: you must be able to pursue the path of dharma, righteousness, through your beliefs, actions, and speech. You must be able to earn wealth of all kinds, emotional, spiritual and even financial. You must be able to pursue pleasures, of art, food and sex. You must be able to keep it together so that your pursuits are not futile; you can live fully, making room for pleasure and pain, without being carried away by them.

They say that everything that can be known is already revealed. The *Kathopanishad* is a dialogue between Yama, the God of Death, and Nachiketa, a young boy. Yama offers Nachiketa endless life, freedom from old age, all the wealth on earth, the company of beautiful women who can sing, dance and entertain, but he isn't lured by it.

'What use is all this wealth?' he asks Yama. 'The senses perceive less over time and all this joy will fade.' (We have all felt that. The first-time shopping at Oxford or Bond Street isn't the same as shopping the third time. Everything external, no matter how exclusive or expensive, fades.) 'I seek that joy which is timeless. That is the only boon I will settle for.' And Yama goes on to tell him the ultimate secret of life and death.

You can read that in good time, but for now, all you need is the fuel to pursue all that you want to in life and to get ripe old with time. Come, let's eat.

## Appendices

### A. The latest on ...

#### 1. Weight-loss drugs

It's 2025, and 'Glucagon-like peptide-1 receptor agonists (GLP-1RAs)', the likes of Ozempic, Wegovy, Mounjaro, etc., also popularly called the 'weight-loss drugs', will dominate the conversations (for the really rich initially, before cheaper versions flood the market). While there may be a category of people for whom these are beneficial, they are almost being used as a recreational drug. Promoted aggressively by everyone – from medical professionals to influencers – it is already a \$50 billion market and is expected to cross \$100 billion in next five years.

That there is a long list of side-effects – especially related to the gastrointestinal tract – are just waived off as inconveniences for a greater good. What is the greater good? Weight loss? Most of which is coming from fat-free mass (i.e., muscles, organs, bones, etc.), and that invariably plateaus within 6–12 months as the body makes metabolic

adjustments. Not to mention the fact that it bounces back with a vengeance when you stop the medication, which you will at some point due to the side-effects (more than 60 per cent stop).

\* 'Ozempic face' has entered the lexicon and describes the wasting and ageing that takes place prominently on the face of those on GLP-1RAs drugs. Similarly, there is an Ozempic butt also.

## 2. Sugar

1. Don't replace sugar with non-sugar sweeteners, e.g., in your chai, coffee, etc. The WHO, in its latest report on non-sugar sweeteners (NSS),<sup>11</sup> has warned against their use for weight loss or to manage any metabolic disease like diabetes. These include aspartame, saccharin, sucralose, stevia and stevia derivatives.
2. You can safely have regular white sugar in your chai, coffee, sherbets, homemade laddoos, kheer, etc., while staying within recommended sugar limits. The WHO (also USA, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, India) recommends limiting added sugar intake to 5–10 per cent of daily diet. This is about 6–12 tsp per day.
3. What we need to avoid instead are ultra-processed foods (junk foods) like cereals, juices, colas, energy drinks, ketchup, breads, jams, cookies, biscuits, etc.

### 3. Alcohol

'No amount or kind of alcohol is good for your health. It doesn't matter what alcohol it is – wine, beer, cider or spirits. Drinking alcohol, even a small amount, is damaging to everyone, regardless of age, sex, gender, ethnicity, tolerance for alcohol or lifestyle.'

The above statement is now the official stand of all leading global health organizations including the WHO<sup>12</sup>, the *Lancet* and even official government guidelines in countries like Canada. And considering the massive clout of the alcohol industry, it really means the evidence is now impossible to suppress. An aggregate of hundreds of research papers over decades have confirmed beyond doubt that alcohol is toxic. It's now conclusively linked to many types of cancers and mental health issues, along with the already known side-effects of liver damage, high blood sugar, and so on.

As a consumer, make an informed decision regarding alcohol, knowing that a) any one type of alcohol is not better than the other and b) there are no health benefits, only harm.

P.S. Ireland is the first country in the European Union (EU) to ensure that, from 2026, all alcohol products will have comprehensive labelling about health risks from its consumption, including warnings about the risks of developing cancers. In Asia, South Korea is following suit.

## 4. Social determinants of health

SDOH, as they are known, are the non-medical factors that affect your health. These are conditions in which people are born, live, learn, work, play and age.

Some of the SDOH are:

- *Pincode*: If you live in an area with parks and promenades, you will have access to a neighbourhood where going out for a walk would be an easy and safe choice. Think Bandra West, 400050.
- *Income*: Poverty reduces your chances of access to nutritious food, sanitation and dignity. So everyone having a stable and secure income is not just good for the economy – also good for health.
- *Education*: Access and quality of education has a positive influence on your health. An IPS officer is typically in good shape and a constable, out of shape. The education and income of your mother matters too.
- *Caste, community, class*: Not only do these determine your social mobility but also access to education, jobs and therefore health.
- *Environment*: Air and water pollution outside the house and safety (prevention of domestic violence) inside it.
- *Transportation*: Better mass transport, walkable cities and lesser time sitting in traffic jams, burning fuel and doomscrolling.

SDOH are the reason why conversations should not be reduced to calories, will power, determination to exercise, etc. Because that's really not the complete picture. Everytime your favourite influencer talks about 'excuses', they are overlooking SDOH.

## B. One lakh to 12 hajaar

Food	Traditionally eaten as	Appropriated today as
White gourd	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Sabzi</li> <li>- Halwa or petha</li> <li>- Curries with lentils or fish</li> </ul>	Juice on empty stomach
Moringa	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Flowers ka sabzi</li> <li>- Sabzi of leaves or their addition to dals and curries</li> <li>- Drumstick in curries and dals</li> </ul>	Powder in water on an empty stomach
Cinnamon	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Spice in pulao</li> <li>- Seasoning in pies</li> <li>- Part of masala chai</li> </ul>	Cinnamon water in the morning
Jeera	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Part of tadka for khichdi and many sabzis</li> <li>- Added to chaas and buttermilk in cooking</li> <li>- Jeera goli as a digestive</li> </ul>	Jeera paani in the morning

<b>Food</b>	<b>Traditionally eaten as</b>	<b>Appropriated today as</b>
Amla	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Achaar and muramba (and chyawanprash)</li> <li>- Sherbet</li> <li>- Amla supari as digestive</li> </ul>	Amla shot in the morning
Sattu	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Summer drink in Bihar and parts of North India</li> <li>- Barfis during Teej, shared with all by the Marwari community</li> <li>- Litti in Bihar, popular travel food</li> </ul>	Protein shake post workout

## C. New junk food

It's easy to tell the junk food; it has ads, jingles, endorsements – almost a recall factor. But then there is the new junk food that is positioning itself like health food. The table below is meant to help you identify both. And for you to know that individual ingredients don't make a food good or bad, it is the processing, shelf life, additives, etc., that are the villains.

If the left column is dominated by large conglomerates, the right one belongs to start-ups who write me emails saying, 'We love your work, join our revolution to make India healthier'. Euphemism for 'Watch us get as big as the conglomerates. Miss out at your own risk.' It is, after all, the fastest-growing category of packaged foods in India.

Irrespective, know that there is no alternative to investing time in learning to cook. And that health cannot be bought off the shelves.

Junk food	'Health-washed' junk food
Sugar-sweetened beverages (SSB) – Colas, juices, caffeinated energy drinks, ready yogurt drinks, etc.	SSB products with zero- or low-calorie sugar substitutes, vitamin enriched or good bacteria versions
Preserves and dressings – Jams, peanut butter, marmalades, ketchup, mustard, mayo, salad dressings, etc.	Low-fat, low-sugar, dairy-free, high protein versions
Chocolates, cakes, ice-creams, biscuits, breakfast cereals, chips and cookies, etc.	Keto, vegan, low-sugar, low-fat, jaggery, gut-friendly, gluten-free, millet, without seed oil versions
Ready to eat or frozen or 2-minute versions – Noodles, pasta, soups, cutlets, hash browns, fries, etc.	Millet, baked, low-sugar, gluten-free, vegan, high-fibre, high-protein versions

Note:

Health-washing is commonly used by the food industry to position the same junk food as better or healthier (and pricier), by replacing one ingredient in a cocktail of harmful ingredients. E.g., Zero-calorie colas, vegan ice-cream, millet instant noodles, etc.

- Keep the junk food consumption to the bare minimum (a small part of the 20 per cent), regardless of which column you pick from.
- UPF/junk food is addictive in nature, which is why you

want those chips and colas and chocolates, even when you know they are not good for you. Unlike alcohol, there is no 12-step program to help you tackle that.

- The latest studies show that UPFs are not just detrimental to physical but also to mental health.
- The lawsuit on the food industry in the US is being called the tobacco moment for UPFs, one that will make it imperative for the industry to carry a health warning.
- Meantime Robert Kennedy Jr. is vowing to make cola use cane sugar instead of beet. That is like saying vaping is better than smoking. It's the same.

## A Note on the Author

Rujuta Diwekar is India's leading public health advocate and amongst the most followed nutritionists globally. Her books have sold more than 1.75 million copies and her videos have been viewed more than 300 million times. Her clear and simple message to eat local, seasonal, and traditional, has redefined the discourse on health and wellness, nudging it away from diet trends and towards sustainable well-being of people and the planet.